Ones to watch
A look at the rising stars of the hospitality industry
As experienced investors in the hospitality industry we know that innovation and brand loyalty are more important than ever. In this report we have brought together the sector’s chefs and operators grabbing the attention of the industry and customers alike.

From chops to chicken and cuisine from Kolkata to Melbourne, we look at the ones to watch over the coming year.

**Ones to watch**
Clare Smyth
Prue Freeman and Tom Onions
Martin Williams
Asma Khan
Chris Miller
Adam Hyman
Carl Clarke and David Wolanski
Mark Wright
Leon Esfahani
Paul Hemings and Cara Ceppetelli
Nick White
Tom Adams
Gavin Adair
Gordon Ker
Mark Smith
Clare opened her first solo venture, Core by Clare in July 2017 in Notting Hill. The opening follows the Chef Patron’s previous role at Gordon Ramsay’s three Michelin star, Royal Hospital Road.
Prue Freeman and Tom Onions

Daisy Green, an Aussie-inspired all day cafe in central London was launched in 2012. Founded by Prue Freeman and Tom Onions, the independent business now extends across eight locations in the capital (with a 4,000 sq ft Soho location coming soon), each providing a unique, authentic and uplifting Australian experience.

Martin Williams

Martin Williams was previously the managing director at Gaucho. After nine years leading the brand, he ventured out to launch M Restaurants, a multi-faceted venue concept specialising in steak, wine and private members lounges, in the capital. He has recently opened his third site, the first under an ‘M Bar & Grill’ brand, in Twickenham.

“The two central London M venues are unashamedly ambitious and have both been rewarded with a plethora of awards and excellent financial performance. A third M ‘flagship’ style venue has been secured to open in 2020. In the meantime, M Bar & Grill is a neighbourhood version of the M brand and has great roll out potential in commuter towns and in residential sites in London. The M Wine Store is also performing beyond expectation and has been identified as a unique element of M with interesting potential.

Current projects have seen M enter the worlds of rugby, F1 and polo with a view to creating a strong brand which engages its private members and regulars, with a clear potential to expand beyond simple restaurants. Current projects with a number of luxury retail brands and hotels are in discussion.”
Asma is the founder-owner of Darjeeling Express—an Indian restaurant that serves traditional home-style family dishes from Kolkata, Hyderabad and Western Uttar Pradesh. The kitchen is run by an all-female team of housewives and amateur cooks. The restaurant received a 5-star review from Grace Dent in ES Magazine and ranked in the top Indian restaurants by Tatler Condé Nast Traveller.

**What inspired you to get into this industry?**
My mother had a food business in Calcutta in the 80s and I grew up loving the hustle and bustle of the kitchen. I loved the buzz and excitement of the business and the excitement of preparing huge feasts. Cooking and feeding friends and family was always an important part of my family life and after spending my early years very lonely and home sick in Cambridge, I decided I would start a food business as that was one way of feeling connected to my roots and celebrating my family heritage.

**What is it that makes Darjeeling Express so successful and appealing to customers?**
I think people love our story - our journey began with a £50 investment and an army of part-time nannies and then it grew organically. We are different from many other restaurants, we are seen as authentic and not “PR created” - the decor in the restaurant reflects the home-style feel which is also reflected in the food we serve.

**How do you ensure you stay relevant in such a saturated and competitive marketplace?**
Saturated and competitive compounded with Brexit is making it harder to be in the restaurant business. However, I feel optimistic about our future as we have a small dedicated kitchen and front of house team and we are lucky that we are not competing for staff like many Indian restaurants. For many of the chefs in our kitchen, working in Darjeeling Express is not a “job”; it is their calling and liberation. The peace and calm in our kitchen comes from many of our kitchen team seeing the restaurant as a refuge, a safe place where they can celebrate their heritage and feel valued as an individual.

**What does the future hold for Darjeeling Express?**
I am not sure about opening a second site, but on nights when we have to turn people away as we cannot fit them in I do think about opening a new place. We would need to expand at some point and getting into other food related work may also be an option.

**If you had to give other operators one piece of valuable advice what would it be?**
Take advice. In my experience people in the industry are always willing to give advice and support and I am very grateful to Indian chefs who gave me their time and were hugely supportive.
Former Soho House Group Commercial Director, Chris, launched White Rabbit Fund in July 2016, as a restaurant investment and advisory service. The business offers budding entrepreneurs funding, financial management, budgeting, property sourcing, operational expertise, legal assistance, expansion planning and debt structuring, with the ambition to support new and existing concepts to flourish. Investments include Indian concept ‘Kricket’, Hawaiian grab-and-go brand ‘Island Poke’, pasta restaurant ‘Lina’, and is soon to open a modern Chinese restaurant by Michelin starred chef Andrew Wong.

What inspired you to get into this industry?
I started my career in private equity – from there I became the commercial director for Soho House Group focusing on rolling out clubs and restaurants around the world. I gained experience working on both sides of the table – the investor side (looking at EBITDA and growth), and the operator side (seeing the numerous day-to-day challenges fast-growing brands face). There are big opportunities but early stage restaurants often lack the structure and rigour that you learn in the PE world to facilitate growth. I felt I had built up a set of skills from both the investor and operator perspectives that could help entrepreneurs expand - so I launched White Rabbit.

What has been the most enjoyable moment of your career so far?
Walking past the sites and seeing them busy is hugely rewarding. It’s a tough industry – the teams have worked incredibly hard to create their businesses, so I get a huge sense of pride in them, seeing the sites where they are today. It’s great to walk into a restaurant with a queue going out of the door knowing a few months ago it was just a sketch of a floor plan.

How do you stand out from competitors?
Though the restaurant market is incredibly competitive, among operators and restaurant investors it’s actually quite a friendly world. There are some incredible people/groups that back early stage restaurants like JKS, Dipak Panchal, Paul Campbell, and Fulham Shore. An investment is a partnership for a long time. You have to really get on with your partners and believe in the long-term vision. I may be the right partner for some businesses and others would work better with a different investor. It’s a personal thing that you work out as you spend time with each founder. Just getting a deal done is not the win – it’s a journey and your success is fully aligned with your partner’s.

What does the future hold for White Rabbit?
We have a number of very exciting new openings in the pipeline for 2018. The focus is on getting those open and operating well. The industry will face a tough year so we just want to make sure we are providing great food, at accessible prices and an excellent experience. But I am a big believer that if you have the right offering, a down turn is a huge opportunity to expand in this industry. 50% of this business is a property game – over the next few years we will hopefully see some more sensible rents. So I am definitely still looking to grow.

If you had to give operators one piece of advice for 2018 what would it be?
The focus has to be quality. In a tough market there is always shift to quality. You must be obsessive about getting the small things right. Customers cannot be taken for granted because there are a lot of great options out there.
Adam is the founder of CODE Hospitality, a leading hospitality media and consultancy business. Founded in 2012, CODE is a community for the hospitality industry, as well as an investor in and advisor to a range of London’s leading hospitality businesses, including Kitty Fisher’s, Santo Remedio, Sub Cult and Butchies.

CODE publishes a weekly e-bulletin for the trade that goes out to 30,000 hospitality professionals, as well as a quarterly print magazine. The CODE app is a unique dedicated digital benefits platform for the hospitality industry with exclusive dining offers at over 200 restaurants across the UK including Hawksmoor, The River Cafe, MEATliquor, St JOHN and Fera at Claridge’s.

What made you want to work in the hospitality industry?
The people. My mother has always worked in hospitality and I was lucky enough to dine out regularly while growing up and experience amazing hospitality. I remember dining in a restaurant in New York when I was about 16 years old and during that meal I realised that I had to work in this industry. Despite training and qualifying as a chartered surveyor, I genuinely look forward to working with restaurants, going to them and talking about them every day – it’s more than a job.

How do you think tech will impact the industry in the next few years?
I think tech can play a clever role behind the scenes in restaurants when it comes to recognising customers, their loyalty and being able to keep track of their favourite foods, wines and where they dine. However, the day that the human touch in a restaurant gets replaced by tech will be a very sad day indeed. I don’t want to order from an iPad or have the human interaction taken away. We have enough technology in our everyday lives as it is – going to a restaurant should be an antidote to that. Breaking bread with someone and having a conversation with them, as well as those working in the restaurant.

What does the future hold for CODE?
2018 will see the launch of our new app, which will allow us to really look to grow our community internationally. We’re focused on providing the best intel and platform for the hospitality industry, as well as continue to look to advise and invest in interesting hospitality businesses run by passionate people.
Carl and David first met at Latitude Festival in 2010 and from there developed a plan to open a quality chicken fast-casual concept alongside sour cocktails. Chick ‘n’ Sours was born in April 2015. The brand is backed by minority shareholders, Active Partners, and currently operates two sites in Haggerston and Covent Garden.

What were your major challenges to entering the market, and how have you overcome them?
The biggest challenge we found was finding an affordable site in areas we were looking at. We had no money for huge premiums that were being asked. So, we pounded the pavements of Kingsland Road in Haggerston with letters to give to business owners asking if they were looking to sell their lease. We got a phone call from a guy called Ali running a greasy spoon, went & met him, shook hands and we were off & running.

What is it that makes Chick ‘n’ Sours so successful and appealing to customers?
Like most others in the same position we have worked extremely hard, slept on our restaurant floors and made huge sacrifices in pursuit of our dreams. It’s hard to say why people have been so receptive to what we have created but what we do know is that Carl & I are obsessive about every detail of the food, hospitality and creating an awesome environment. That seems to be the foundations of the Chick ‘n’ Sours experience and we are so fortunate to have an amazing group of people working with us who share the same values and deliver this to our customers day in, day out.

How do you ensure you stay relevant in such a saturated and competitive marketplace?
We don’t focus on trying to stay relevant, we just do what we do and hope people enjoy it too.

What does the future hold for the business?
The short term is going to be pretty tricky for all operators with all the widely reported challenges facing the industry. Hopefully we will continue to grow steadily and create an organisation where we can continue to give young people a rewarding career for themselves in this crazy hospitality industry we work in!

If you had to give other operators one piece of valuable advice what would it be?
We are very fortunate to be in a job where we get paid to make people happy, but never forget you are running a business. Make sure you know every detail about your business inside out and weigh up opportunities very carefully before jumping in. Don’t dive in with the romantic visions. Make sure the number stack up even at your lowest projections. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is!
Mark founded Rola Wala following a trip to India in 2012. Inspired, he started trading at street food festivals and markets across London, offering healthy Indian street food. The brand is known for its flavour packed Indian rolls and Spice Bowls, each with a minimum of 43 ingredients.

What made you first want to work in hospitality?
I’ve always loved that fact that working in hospitality puts you so close to the customer - making a meal for somebody is quite an intimate experience and if you genuinely enjoy it, and customers like what you do, then you’ve potentially got a great business!

What is the biggest lesson you’ve learned since setting up Rola Wala?
It’s all about people!

What does the future hold for Rola Wala?
As a small challenger brand we are shifting the status quo in the fast food market and we’re an authentic brand looking for locations our customers can connect with - Spitalfields, Leeds Trinity, Oxford Westgate (and our next location, which I’m keeping a secret!) are all incredible spaces. At the same time I’m not sure right now is the time to open a lot of restaurants - my thinking has shifted to getting our products in front of customers in the most efficient way - delivery is important. A lot of restaurants are selling a lot of food and not making a lot of money so getting the delivery model right is key. Ultimately I’d like mass availability of our product and we’re already operating in 3 (soon 4) UK cities. Why not blanket them with Rola Wala in the restaurant, at the supermarket, and in the home?
Leon Esfahani

Leon is a seasoned franchise executive with past experience including Starbucks and Pizza Hut. He has recently signed a franchise deal for Denny’s which has announced plans for a new launch into the UK market, signing a franchise deal to launch a site in Swansea, with another planned for Cardiff. Denny’s currently operates 2,100 restaurants in the US.

**What interested you about working in hospitality?**
I got the bug for it when I was 4 years old! My dad used to pay me 2p for every box that I made up in his Southern Fried chicken franchise which was the first in Wales.

**What do you see in hospitality that excites you at the moment?**
I am excited to be able to bring all day dining to the UK as there is no-one in the restaurant business that does this on a national scale in the way I will be doing it. I see my chance to create new sectors within hospitality and change the way people see it forever.

**What does 2018 hold for you and your business?**
In 2018 our franchise business Magic Brands will be undertaking exceptional growth both with Starbucks and Denny’s. The aim is to create an additional 500 jobs by the end of the year and set us up for even bigger growth in 2019.

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Paul Hemings and Cara Ceppetelli

Former investment banker and his chef wife, Cara Ceppetelli, opened their first fried chicken & waffles restaurant in Shoreditch in 2014. The pair have since grown the BIRD brand to four sites across the capital.

**What is it that makes your concept and offering so successful and appealing to customers?**
We think it is a combination of a few things, really. The fried chicken category itself has grown significantly around us since we opened, but since the beginning the idea always was to provide high quality, proper fried chicken in a restaurant setting – something which hadn’t been done and had left many people with outdated impressions of fried chicken. BIRD offers people the chance to sit down and enjoy great quality fried chicken (increasingly, chicken & waffles as this is by far our most popular category), prepared to order at a reasonable price, and enjoy it with a good drink which may or may not be alcoholic. It’s comfort food and has a very broad appeal across the social spectrum. Plus, proper chicken has been due for a moment for a long time.

**What has been the most enjoyable part of your journey?**
Transforming an idea out of thin air into a decent business has been very rewarding (despite the humbling learning curve, which continues), but for us the biggest enjoyment so far has to have been building the team and working with such a variety of great younger people. It has taught us new things and new ways of looking at things, which is refreshing and inspiring.

**What does the future hold for your business?**
Quality growth, hopefully. In 2018 we hope to expand the brand further, opening new restaurants and forming new partnerships in London. The last couple of years have taught us to be conservative, but that there are also great opportunities out there if you wait for them. We hope to continue to grow the business and give more people the chance to get to know our brand and proper fried chicken.
Nick White was appointed as chief operating officer for Bistrot Pierre in October 2017. He brings to the brand a deep understanding of the restaurant and food delivery business following a career that includes roles at Bella Italia, Chiquito & Garfunkel’s, and Pizza Hut. He is supporting Bistrot Pierre’s organic expansion plans across the UK.

What has been the most enjoyable part of your journey in the hospitality industry so far?
This is a people business and watching talent grow, develop and become successful is incredibly satisfying. So many of our people started out as part time team members and became “hooked on hospitality” and then worked their way up the ranks, as I did, and this is one industry where your career growth is in your own hands.

What is it that makes Bistrot Pierre so successful and appealing to customers?
The level of culinary and hospitality skills this business not only strives for, but consistently expects, is a terrific competitive advantage. We have 22 restaurants, 17 have a Trip advisor score of 4.5 and 5 at 4.0. Combine that with an amazing, eclectic and unique asset base and overlay our incredible value for money and this is a brand that stands out for many reasons.

How do you ensure you stay relevant in such a saturated and competitive marketplace?
By really understanding our customers in granular detail. We have terrific insight into their lifestyle and behaviours and when we combine this deep knowledge with very careful site selection we know we can compete and over deliver in the locations that we’re opening in. In our core business, it’s about consistency of execution and that is the reason why our oldest restaurant in Nottingham delivered record sales in its 24th year over Christmas.

What does the future hold for Bistrot Pierre?
I joined this business for some very simple and personal reasons. Many businesses in our sector talk about becoming “truly great” or “the best” or use similar words. The difference in Bistrot Pierre is that the culture is infectious and centred around a love of food and of delivering great hospitality experiences. The people are amazing and have a passion for hospitality and for success and I know we have an incredible amount of potential to grow and I believe, to become standout in a crowded marketplace. My role is to maintain the passion and the longstanding culture while at the same time nurture skills and disciplines that allow us to grow.

If you had to give other operators one piece of valuable advice what would it be?
It’s a very tough market just now but I don’t believe businesses fail just because of a downturn in consumer confidence. Businesses have failed and will fail for two reasons; Firstly a lack of relevance with their core customers; and secondly a dangerous, but contagious, quick fix approach to rapid expansion and over paying rents. I think the real secret to success, at any time, but especially in tough times, is to get to know your customers and what they truly value about your brand, not just superficially, but on an emotional level and then protect that at all costs. So many brands are slicing away at the things their customers love and doing each cut in isolation. No one “cut” hurts but stand back and the small slices are suddenly massive and brands are being destroyed.
Tom Adams
Tom is the chef and barbecue expert who co-founded Pitt Cue, which he grew from its humble roots, serving ribs from the back of a van. Today, the award-winning chef has gone on to open Coombeshead Farm in East Cornwall.

Gavin Adair
Gavin Adair is the new managing director of Rosa’s Thai Café. Prior to joining the business, he spent three-years as finance director at ASK Italian and a further two as commercial & strategy director at Oaxaca Limited, the parent company to Wahaca, DF/Mexico and Burrito Mama. Rosa’s Thai Café is currently a 10-strong London chain.

What interested you about working in the hospitality industry?
I was attracted to the people side of it and the need to strike a balance between relying on data versus relying on feel. And the need to make quick, short term trading decisions the one minute, and longer term strategic decisions the next.

During your career in hospitality what has been the most important lesson you’ve learned?
That it’s not complicated but it’s certainly hard! When you think about it, restaurant managers are running standalone huge revenue businesses with significant revenue and customer numbers, in what can sometimes be a stressful environment. Having a strong team and trusting them is crucial.

What made you want to join Rosa’s Thai Café?
I’d always admired the Rosa’s brand and product, so when co-owner, Alex Moore, approached me it was actually an incredibly easy decision. The Thai market is in growth and no one has yet owned the space so that opportunity was a big draw.

What does the future hold for the business?
Further expansion within Greater London as well as our first out of London regional openings are both in our current business plan. We see clear opportunities in delivery and vegetarian offerings across all Rosa’s sites, with fantastic initial feedback from our Rosa’s Thai Veggie Soho pop-up which has launched in our London Soho site. But I want to keep things simple and avoid the trap of trying to do too much, too soon. I want to keep us focused on the nuts and bolts of our customer experiences, investing in our teams and in our customer insight whilst improving our structure and processes at a pace the business can digest.
What inspired you to work in the hospitality industry?
I enjoy the people part of the industry. Putting a smile on faces and looking after people, but most of all I love the challenge of building your own team and culture to create a great place for people to build a career.

What were the biggest challenges to entering the market and how have you overcome them?
Property was and continues to be a huge challenge. I think it took a couple of years to find the right spot for Blacklock in Soho. With no operational experience or covenant I was unsurprisingly at the back of the queue with any and all landlords I met. In the end we stumbled across an old brothel in the basement of a run down side street in Soho with no frontage whatsoever. It was leaking throughout and didn’t even have planning permission to be a restaurant. For some reason I liked the feel of it and no one else did which meant, for the first time, I was at the top of the list to get it - just so happened I was the only one on the list.

What does the future hold for Blacklock?
We are always trying to get better every day. We want to build a great company focussed on culture that our team is passionate about and proud to work for. We focus on getting that right and hope to open more restaurants along the way where the right opportunities present themselves and our team can grow into them. We are very particular on sites and always look for character buildings with heritage that we can put our stamp on and where we think we can do something interesting and develop the Blacklock story even further. If we’re not passionate and excited about the opportunity, we won’t do it.

What is the best advice you’ve been given about working in hospitality?
Will Beckett from Hawksmoor has always been a big help and support to me. When I first told him about my idea I seem to remember him choking on his drink and doing his upmost to dissuade me. In doing so he made it clear how much hard work and moving parts go into running a restaurant. Nothing can ever truly prepare you for that but I at least went in with my eyes open. That, and Danny Meyer’s distinction between service and hospitality. We place a huge emphasis on how we treat people at Blacklock and creating experiences through genuine and caring hospitality which we see as the most important part of our job and Danny Meyer definitely helped focus that for me at the beginning. We have our own Blacklock twist on it now but it was the best starting point.

Gordon Ker

Gordon opened Blacklock following a career advising restaurants and hotels, launching the first Blacklock, a modern version of the old British chophouse, in a former brothel in Soho. Blacklock is now an award-winning restaurant group, known for serving the best meat in the country for super value for money and one of the best Sunday roasts in London. The operator has two sites in the capital and plans to extend the brand further in the future.
Mark Smith

Mark Smith joined Pho in 2015 as finance director and is now its managing director overseeing its expansion plans. The Vietnamese restaurant chain first opened its doors in Clerkenwell in 2005 and today the brand has grown to 25 sites across the country.

What inspired you to move into the hospitality industry?
My career to date has been spent in retail and my passion is working with great people selling a product I love and I see no difference selling amazing food from selling a bike or sportswear (my previous two retail roles). I get to work with great people and focus on delivering an amazing customer experience.

What is it that makes Pho so successful and appealing to customers?
We have a great product that is amazingly tasty, filling, healthy and great value for money, which gives us a great start. This is delivered by fantastic staff focussed on giving the customer an amazing experience in a fun vibrant environment.

How do you ensure you stay relevant in such a saturated and competitive marketplace?
You need to maintain a laser like focus on delivering a fantastic experience for the customer whilst always evolving your offer to reflect changing customer trends.

What does the future hold for Pho?
We are at the start of our journey and have now put the structure in place to grow steadily across the UK. We will not rush but will only open good sites when they become available not to hit some artificial openings number target.

If you had to give other operators one piece of valuable advice what would it be?
It sounds very clichéd but our business is all about our people. Only hire amazing people, give them a structure to work within, motivate and inspire them and then most importantly the freedom to operate.

Steve Cordiner

If you would like to find out about our experience investing in the hospitality industry or are keen to talk to us about your business, please contact investments@livingbridge.com