

Britain's bouncing back – and pubs and restaurants are booming. The problem? A shortage of service staff – and they won't work for crumbs any more

Where HAVE all the waiters gone?



Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

FIRST, it was shortages of hand sanitiser and toilet rolls. Then everywhere sold out of hot tubs and bicycles. Now, as we enter what will (hopefully) be the final chapter of the coronavirus pandemic, Britain faces a crippling new shortage – and this one's going to hit us in the stomach.

Finger-clicking diners have been moaning for years that there's never a waiter when you really want one. Right now, pub and restaurant bosses are saying the exact same thing.

For as the hospitality industry emerges from aspic, people willing to pull pints, wait tables, or toil over hot stoves are suddenly very thin on the ground.

The reality of a recruitment crisis emerged last week when Pizza Express announced that it's seeking 1,000 staff to join its 360 UK sites ahead of May 17, when indoor hospitality returns.

D&D London, one of the UK's largest fine dining groups, which owns Chelsea's famous Bluebird and the Michelin-starred Angler in the City, is seeking 350 people across its 43 restaurants.

Rivals, both small and large, reckon they'll be looking pretty hard, since almost all of them are also desperately seeking new staff.

In London and the South East, where the shortage is most acute, the going rate for waiters has already risen from around £11 to almost £15 an hour, plus tips, while some kitchen staff are commanding salaries a third higher than before Covid struck.

'Wages are going through the roof,' James Chiavarini, owner of Il Portico, London's oldest family restaurant, says. 'I have chefs who usually would be on about £35k and they are now saying, "We want 50".'

'Getting new people is impossible. I can't hire new staff to open a place that I am launching in June. You advertise and they arrange to come for an interview, but a day or two later they get in touch and say: "Sorry, I've already got a job."'

Harry Lobek, who co-owns the London Shell Co and The Grand Duchess – two restaurants on boats moored on the Grand Union Canal in Paddington – says the recruitment crisis is writ large on Instagram, where modish restaurants traditionally post pictures of exotic food.

Now, almost every place I follow is also posting job adverts. Pay rises are already happening and you are seeing it in the amount people are charging for drinks. A London pint is now £6.50, and that's a big increase on pre-pandemic rates.

'Food prices are staying steady for now, but I think an increase might have to happen there, too.'

Richard Gladwin, of Gladwin Brothers, a fine-dining chain with four London restaurants, says he currently employs 40 staff, but needs 60 on his payroll to operate at full capacity, plus a further 20 by mid-summer when he aims to open a new site in Richmond.

RICHARD GREEN, owner of the 28-50 chain of upmarket wine bars and restaurants, says he's seeking to hire 'around 50' new people by the end of May, and the same again by summer. He believes many smaller operators, who let all their staff go during lockdown, will be unable to find anyone to fill their roles before May 17.

'The furlough scheme wasn't there, for employers, and some of them, particularly smaller places, found that they couldn't afford to keep staff on,' he says. 'They will now be trying to recruit from scratch. I think they're going to be stretched, in all honesty.'

On a paper, a shortage of hospitality workers may seem odd, given that we have read many grim news



by Guy Adams

stories about redundancies. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics has estimated that around 355,000 jobs vanished in the trade during the past year.

Yet behind the current crisis lies a sort of perfect storm, in which endless lockdowns, the post-Brexit tightening of immigration rules and people choosing to make lifestyle changes, have dramatically reduced the size of the potential workforce.

The trend is particularly strong in our capital city, where a disproportionate number of service workers hail from Europe.

'When the last lockdown came along, a lot of our European staff had a chance to go home for Christmas, which they have never previously been able to do because they have to work,' says Green.

'Many of them went back to Romania, or Poland, or Bulgaria, and when they got there they found out that these are not the

places they left five years ago. They've developed enormously. It means lots of them have decided to stay [in their homelands].'

Simultaneously, post-Brexit immigration rules mean that overseas workers seeking to come to the UK for the first time must now secure a visa. 'We could fill our restaurants many times over with French staff, but they can't get here,' he adds.

Another prominent restaurateur tells me he only discovered that many of his workers weren't returning when he rang them a few days ago.

'A lot of people went back to Europe and carried on claiming furlough, while also signing on to collect benefits from their governments. They've done very nicely indeed. They don't have to pay London rent, and for the last few months have been living with Mum and Dad for free while earning even more thanks to the taxpayers of two different countries.'

'So when I called them and said I wanted them back in on May 17, they laughed and basically said "Sorry, we can't get a flight!"'

'I have contacts who could find me other staff from the continent, but then you have to get them a visa and I have no idea how to do that and the Government is being absolutely no help at all.'

British staff have also vanished from the trade. Many younger people who lost their jobs during the pandemic appear to have moved into other professions, while more experienced staff have

reassessed their priorities during lockdown and taken jobs nearer to their homes.

'With us, a few people left because they don't want to commute any more,' says Harry Lobek. 'Staff from South London were saying they'd rather find work in local restaurants as they don't want the 45-minute commute at both ends of the day. It's fair enough.'

AWAY from the South East, where the cost of living is cheaper, employers seem to have had better luck hanging onto staff, thanks in no small part to recent increases in the minimum wage, which has gone up significantly since Covid struck.

'It's a North-South thing,' says Richard Kershaw, the CEO of Joseph Holt, which runs 127 pubs across Manchester and the North-West. 'We will lose some staff at the end of furlough, because they have decided they want to do something else, but generally we are finding a lot of loyalty – whereas pub chains down South are desperately trying to hire.'

Just 2 per cent of his 450-odd workers came from EU countries before the pandemic, insulating him from visa concerns.

He, too, says that recent increases in the minimum wage have made hospitality salaries far more attractive. 'Minimum wage is now £8.91;

before the first lockdown it was £8.21. And people up here don't have to pay silly London rents. For a top food pub, landlords are being paid £40-£50k, plus a bonus, and that's not to be sneezed at. It's no longer a job where you are working 40 hours a week for pin money. It can be a serious career.'

So while wage inflation may make our bar bills rise, there could also be an increase in the number of middle-aged staff staying in the hospitality trade, as is more common in countries such as France, where waiting on tables is regarded as a noble profession.

Will the current shortage improve life for servers and diners in the UK, too? It's a mixed picture.

As Lobek observes: 'Sure, if you go to places like the River Cafe, you'll already see the odd middle-aged, middle-class person who has decided to work there, probably as a sort of lifestyle job. But will you find the same sort of people going to Zizzi? I doubt it.'

For Chiavarini, latecomers to the profession could be in for a big surprise: 'Hospitality rates are between £11 and £15 an hour minimum wage with no tips, but we can't find people. Shop girls earn minimum wage with no tips, and there's no shortage of them. Why?'

'Because working in restaurants is hard. You are busting yourself, spending hours on your feet, doing something that's genuinely difficult. That's why people leave.'

And also, perhaps, why finding new staff to replace them is such a kitchen nightmare.