



Holding the Forte

As restaurant and bar development manager for Rocco Forte Hotels, Lydia Forte explains how she sets out to devise F&B concepts that are as revered by locals as they are hotel guests.

Words: Harry McKinley

We're tucked away in a corner of Donovan Bar, at Brown's Hotel in Mayfair. It's part of Rocco Forte Hotels, a family of boutique hotels established in 1996 by Sir Rocco Forte – son of the late hotel magnate, Lord Charles Forte – and his sister, Olga Polizzi. Both are still firmly at the helm with Sir Rocco Forte the group's CEO and chairman and Polizzi director of design.

We're having coffee with another Forte: Lydia, Rocco's daughter. Restaurant and bar development manager for Rocco Forte Hotels, she's responsible for the concepts, management and performance of the group's F&B offer. It's a good thing then that the cappuccinos are well made.

Modest, ineffably polite, but also possessed of a quiet confidence, her demeanour belies her relative youth: she's just 28 years old. Her position in the company is fairly new. She took on the role in early 2014 and now, over two years later, is demonstrably hitting her stride; F&B profits are up 30%.

Of course, it makes sense for her to join the business that bears her name, but to suggest that she holds her position solely by virtue of family would be to disregard her achievements and experience. During a gap year she interned at the group's Hotel Astoria in St. Petersburg, getting to grips with the basics of hotel operations. Then,

whilst studying Modern History at Oxford, she spent a summer training as a maître d' at the Wolseley. Following her graduation she worked as a waitress at HIX Soho, had stints in restaurant accounting and even in the kitchen, although she's quick to point out that – whilst she loves food – she doesn't consider herself a chef. Then came a position as assistant manager at The Markham Inn, a 'sweet neighbourhood gastropub' in Chelsea. She was there for the opening process but when the manager left just a few weeks in, she found herself running the show. She describes the experience as 'learning by fire'.

What all of this goes to show is that she's ultimately unafraid to get her hands dirty and her time both front of house and back has given her a well rounded understanding of the bar and restaurant trade; of service and of management.

A year into her role at The Markham Inn and her father offered her a position within Rocco Forte. Not the one she holds today, but instead she was tasked with revamping the restaurant at Brown's. "I worked with Mark Hix [the celebrated chef and restaurateur] and together we tried to figure out how we could put the restaurant on the stage," she says. "He'd already been there for five or six years but no one really knew and we'd never thought to put his name above the door. So I made the decision to rename the

restaurant – now HIX Mayfair – and our sales increased by 30% in the first year.”

Then came an MBA from INSEAD, studying in Singapore and France, and a return to London where she took up her current post, having since carved out a prolific body of F&B development work with the company.

Seeing as Forte’s first big ask within Rocco Forte was to revamp a restaurant, and by default bring her fresh perspective to bear, we’re curious as to whether she thinks there’s been a shift in the role of F&B within hotels. “Well, there are these keys players, from Ian Schrager to Andre Balazs, who really started putting F&B as the focal point of the hotel and the rooms were almost secondary,” she says. “We’re not that. My father is a hotelier and founded a company that’s based on rooms, but I wanted very much to try and bring us into that next phase where we focus on creating F&B outlets that are successful in their own right and not because they’re a guest service. We stand out because Rocco Forte Hotels are always located in the best parts of cities that and are always authentic to the locations. We try through the designs that my aunt Olga Polizzi oversees, and the F&B offerings, to create a feeling of ‘place’. With so many of the big brands, you could be anywhere. With the bars and restaurants, I try to devise concepts for the locals and to create focal points for the life of the city. I think that approach is crucial and is ultimately representative of how the mentality behind F&B in hotels has changed.”

Proportionally, F&B represents a substantial chunk of Rocco Forte Hotels’ total revenue. It varies from location to location but typically sits anywhere from 20% to 30%. Here at Brown’s, in the centre of London, it’s particularly high for the group, at 35%. Forte is aiming for 40% and for significant gains company wide. Despite the pressure to drive success, and with her eyes frequently skirting a P&L sheet, she’s unwilling to compromise on the values of the brand or undermine the quality that has already been established. “Sometimes you don’t have to reinvent the wheel, just do things really well,” she explains. “Everyone talks about using local and using seasonal, but a lot of F&B managers will say, ‘we want 25% food costs’. That’s not my approach. I want our food costs to be 30%, the quality to be really high and the margins to come from having hundreds of people knocking on the door.”

It’s a philosophy that works partly because of the scale of Rocco Forte. As a group of boutiques, the brand is defined by its sense of personality and an ethos centred on high standards. This value set is also what enables Forte to take such a determined stance on the issue of outsourcing. While she’s happy to seek outside expertise when necessary, as she explains, “It’s not our model because, actually, we know the kind of quality and level of service we want to deliver and it’s a five star experience. Where we have more than one restaurant, I’m quite happy to, because it’s an added offering, but I tend to work more with consultants than outsourcing.”

One expert on staff is Fulvio Pierangelini, who previously helmed the two Michelin-starred Gambero Rosso in Tuscany. Now closed, the restaurant was regularly listed as one of the top 20 on Restaurant’s World’s 50 Best Restaurants. As creative director of food, he travels with Forte and develops the menu concepts of all of the group’s Italian F&B

outlets. He was instrumental in shaping the direction of Irene at Hotel Savoy in Florence, which opened under Forte’s tenure last year. “It’s kind of his stomping ground, so he knew all of the local suppliers. He would walk around the streets and people would stop him and ask him what he’s doing next,” Forte says. “We developed a concept which is Tuscan food, but with a much lighter, fresher twist. It’s quite hard to find healthy, light food in Florence and we also wanted to do something that was relaxed but had character. It isn’t a dark, wood paneled basement trattoria. It’s elegant but not too formal.”

Recently Forte also oversaw the relaunch of Sofia’s at The Charles Hotel in Munich. It’s a project she’s particularly proud of: a neo bistro and cocktail bar that draws inspiration from the nearby Old Botanical Garden. It has become something of a meeting point in the city, which Forte naturally describes as ‘mission successful’.

As her portfolio of new launches and relauches rapidly expands, however, she’s quickly growing to understand some of the more deep-seated challenges of the hotel F&B sector, particularly with regards to structures and the impact these can have on staff and their ability to perform. “There’s quite a lot of traditional hotelier mentality when it comes to F&B, so I think we really have to change the culture,” she says. “You have this managerial superstructure where you have your general manager, an F&B manager and then I sometimes find that it can be difficult for a restaurant manager or a bar manager to take responsibility for their area and be a bit entrepreneurial in their

mentality. It can be hard to find these amazing characters with charisma who can lead, when everyone has their opinion.”

It’s led us into discussion on one of the industry’s broader and most timely issues: the sourcing

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and training of staff and their subsequent retention. The challenges felt industry wide have seen Rocco Forte adopt the Map My Future platform, developed with government funding by Lydia’s sister, Irene. A mobile app, it gives employees access to all of Rocco Forte’s standards and procedures, training materials and manuals and provides a source of contact with a mentor who can guide them at any point. It also outlines a clear path of potential career progression, showing waiting staff, for example, the goals they need to hit and what they need to achieve to take the next step in their career with the organisation.

Designed to be white labelled, Forte sees it as a creation that is not only helping within her own company, but as something that could have a dramatic impact on staffing across hospitality as whole. “It’s incredibly exciting because we need to reengage and get back to the idea that hospitality can be a career. You can start as a waiter and become a restaurant manager or F&B manager and there are very few industries where that kind of advancement is possible. Anything that helps to reinforce that message, and demonstrate the steps needed, can only be a positive thing for the industry.”

On the issue of service, Forte also feels it’s through core, brand-specific training that restaurants can create the style of delivery that works for them. “Today no one wants formal service and so that’s something that informs how we train our staff,” she says. “It can be an LQA (Leading Quality Assurance) standard in many hotels for the staff to have asked the guest after every course if everything was OK,



HIX Mayfair, Brown's Hotel, London

but it's one of my pet peeves. I would much rather the waiter was paying close attention to the table and knew if something was wrong. Let guests get on with the meal. Focus on the key moments, such as telling a lovely story about a dish or adding a personal touch." With an almost clairvoyant awareness of our conversation, a waitress arrives with a bottle of water to sustain us as we enter the final leg: the new and next.

Rocco Forte has recently expanded into the Middle East with a management contract on the newly built Assila in Jeddah. The hotel features four different F&B concepts, with interiors by Martin Brudnizki. On the ground floor is a café with homemade ice creams, pastries and pastas. The first floor hosts Twenty Four, an all-day dining space that features rotating events in the evening. Pampas, an Argentinian restaurant, features an open grill and 'amazing coloured glass separations and warm brown leather'. Finally, on the rooftop is a poolside Arabic Mediterranean restaurant with views across the city. Forte has found Jeddah to be a revelation and talks passionately about how she is newly enamoured with its food scene.

Next year comes the group's first Asian project and an opening in Shanghai. "The hotel is in a new development in the city, where the old airport used to be. It's been developed into this amazing cultural zone

and, in true Chinese style, they've created it in three years from nothing. There's a history museum, a contemporary art gallery, a concert hall and a tax-free art zone. So it's quite a trendy, arty area, which aligns well for us. We'll definitely have a Chinese offering, an Italian restaurant and a rooftop bar with an amazing view from the 53rd floor. I'm also hoping to bring in a Peruvian restaurant as there's nothing like that in Shanghai and I think they would love it."

As evening approaches it's time to wrap things up and free up our table for the crowd of paying guests that Forte is no doubt happy to see. But as the waitress whisks away our glasses, we're curious, with any number of her own restaurants around the world in which to dine, where does Forte go when she fancies a break from the business?

"Mandarin Oriental was one of the first to do collaborations with big name chefs, and that worked really well. The restaurants are typically great. Chiltern Firehouse is a lot of fun. I also love the breakfast at Le Bristol in Paris, where you can sit in a walled garden full of roses and there's classic silverware and white tablecloths. That's a special experience," she says, but then in a more hushed tone. "I shouldn't say this, but I don't try hotel restaurants very much. I'd much rather see what's underground or on-trend in a city. Although I suppose, more and more, hotels are a reflection of that." ●