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### **Entrepreneurial couple taste sweet success....**

The Merry Harriers, Hambledon enjoys an enviable location on the edge of the Surrey Hills, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty dotted with chalk hills, dense woodland, rich wildlife and attractive market towns and villages stretching across a quarter of the county of Surrey.

Colin and Julie Stoneley took over this picturesque 16 century freehouse in 2008, following various careers in IT training, marketing, graphic design..... And llama trekking!

“We knew the pub and had watched it fall into a bad state of repair over a number of years. But, we always knew it had great potential. Aside of the location, which is fabulous, the property has a lot of land attached and we knew there was scope to really make it a fantastic local pub without spending ridiculous amounts of money. When it came onto the market we snapped it up.” Says Colin.

The premises includes a campsite which, despite the unpredictability of the British weather, is packed with tents, caravans and campervans during the summer months, as walkers, cyclists and families spill out in the county side to make the most of the surroundings.

“There was also the added appeal of being able to re-locate our existing llama trekking business and run it from the pub premises.” Explains Colin. For the past six years this enterprising couple have operated a very successful venture offering people the opportunity to walk with llamas through the Surrey Hills. “It’s really popular with families, it’s surprising how children can be persuaded to enjoy a walk

in the countryside when they have a llama in tow. We have also introduced an evening walk where guests enjoy a stroll through the hills and then arrive back at the pub where a freshly cooked meal is awaiting them.” Colin continues.

Despite the fact the neither Colin or Julie had any experience running a pub, they bit the bullet and now, one year on, the Merry Harriers is going from strength.

This year, the couple have invested in re-landscaping the 120 cover beer garden, which now benefits from a purpose designed boules pitch, new play equipment and a sunny terrace for alfresco dining. “We also have a family of ex-battery hens which wander freely around the garden – the kids just love it!” Says Julie.

“We pride ourselves on being a traditional village pub, with roaring log fires in winter, tasty Sunday roasts and an excellent selection of real ales and wines.” Says Julie.

As far as the food offering is concerned, again the couple were not afraid to jump in at the deep end. Julie explains: “Although I trained to NVQ 3 as a chef and had various work placements in pubs and restaurants, my only real experience in catering has been producing up-market picnics for the llama trekking business.”

The pub has three separate dining areas totally 75 covers, plus a private dining room which can comfortably seat 20 guests.

“We are in a very wealthy area and most of our customers are ABC1. They appreciate good food and are prepared to pay a premium.” Says Julie.

The menu at the Merry Harriers is predominantly traditional English food. Staple menu choices include chicken live pate with home made red onion jam £4.50; garlic mushroom polenta crostini £4.50; Moules Mariniere served with crusty bread 10.95; Wakelings quarterpounder burger with chunky chips 10.95; All food is freshly prepared on the premises using locally sourced ingredients wherever possible.

“We run themed nights on a regular basis, for example we do a steak night where we offer 2 rump steaks with chips or salad and a bottle of house wine for £25.00. This is popular with our regular customers and pre-booking is necessary.”

Having recently invested in recruiting a chef who has spent 7 years in a Michelin starred restaurant, Julie and Colin thought it was time to think about how they could improve their dessert menu.

The pub’s traditional dessert menu includes auntie Yvonne’s apple pudding from a secret recipe; sticky toffee pudding; homemade chocolate mousse; bread and butter pudding, all served with a choice of custard, cream or ice cream and priced at £4.25.

“We were selling around 100 desserts a week. So approximately only 1 in every 4 would choose to have a dessert after their main course. We thought there was scope to increase the volume of desserts sold. We felt that if we got the menu right then it should be an easy sell to persuade customers to try a pudding. If they have a dessert then they may have coffee or a liqueur as well. Also, as soon as someone on the table orders a dessert then other diners will often follow suit. We felt it was an opportunity not to be missed and so decided to see what we could do to drive up sales.” Explains Colin.

“We came across New Forest Ice Cream following a day out on the south coast and were immediately impressed. It is a family run business and prides itself on the quality of the rich, dairy ice creams which are still made in the New Forest from full fat Jersey milk and double cream.” Says Julie.

“In addition, New Forest Ice Creams are made in a nut free environment, and contain no eggs, artificial colours or GM ingredients. All flavourings are from natural sources. This also appealed to us.” Continues Julie.

The company offers a personalised dessert menu service which allows customers to pick and mix from 42 ice cream and sorbet flavours and from a variety of presentation styles. “Working with New Forest Ice Cream, we were able to choose a good mix of ice cream flavours, with something to suit all tastes. We chose the images that we wanted and also picked from a variety of menu designs, selecting

something that we felt would fit in with the style of the pub. When the menu arrived, we were thrilled”.

The couple were confident that as soon as customers saw the ice cream menu on the table they would order and they were right!

The Merry Harriers has been running the New Forest Ice Cream menu alongside the existing traditional dessert menu for four weeks. Despite it being one of the wettest Julys for years, the pub has seen a 138% increase in total dessert sales.

“The interesting thing is that we are still selling roughly the same amount of traditional desserts as we did before. But now we are also selling a similar volume of ice creams as well, in effect doubling our total dessert sales. Two thirds of customers who order a main course now have a dessert as well.”

“New Forest Ice Cream was prepared to spend time with us, training the staff in presentation techniques and serving suggestions. They also emphasised how important it was that we should think of our waiting staff as our dessert ambassadors. We made sure they were fully briefed on each of the desserts on the menu so if a customer asked they can at least describe the dessert in some detail. It sounds obvious but this is an area which is often forgotten about, especially when part time or casual labour is involved.” Says Julie

The company also provided The Merry Harriers with free promotional material such as swingboards, banners and flags which helped promote the ice cream around the pub.

“The ice cream is so quick and easy to serve and requires little preparation. We are selling a 3 scoop portion for £3.35. Chocolate and raspberry ripple meringue are the most popular flavours. Our profit margin is approximately 80%. It’s very easy money and I don’t know why we didn’t think of it before.” Continues Julie.

“Before we bought the Merry Harriers we used to laugh at a road sign which described the pub as serving ‘warm beer and lousy food’. We took that sign down as soon as we moved in and we feel confident that with all the changes we have made

in the past twelve months our customers have a much more positive opinion of the pub now.” Concludes Colin.

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