

Venue management – food and beverage

Revenue gatherer

Elliott Moore, General Manager (catering) outlines operations at the American Express Community Stadium. Plus: f&b advice from expert Robert Read.

The food and beverage operators in sport and entertainment venues have battled manfully through what is turning out to be a longer than expected economic downturn. Event revenue is key to arena viability and matchday revenue in sport-based stadiums has become an important (approximately one third according to Deloitte's Money League) revenue earner for top soccer clubs in Europe. A trend towards outsourcing has seen owners seeking out partners to help take the financial strain of redevelopment or new build, and to bring sector expertise to bear. One of these new partnerships is between Brighton & Hove Albion FC and Azure.

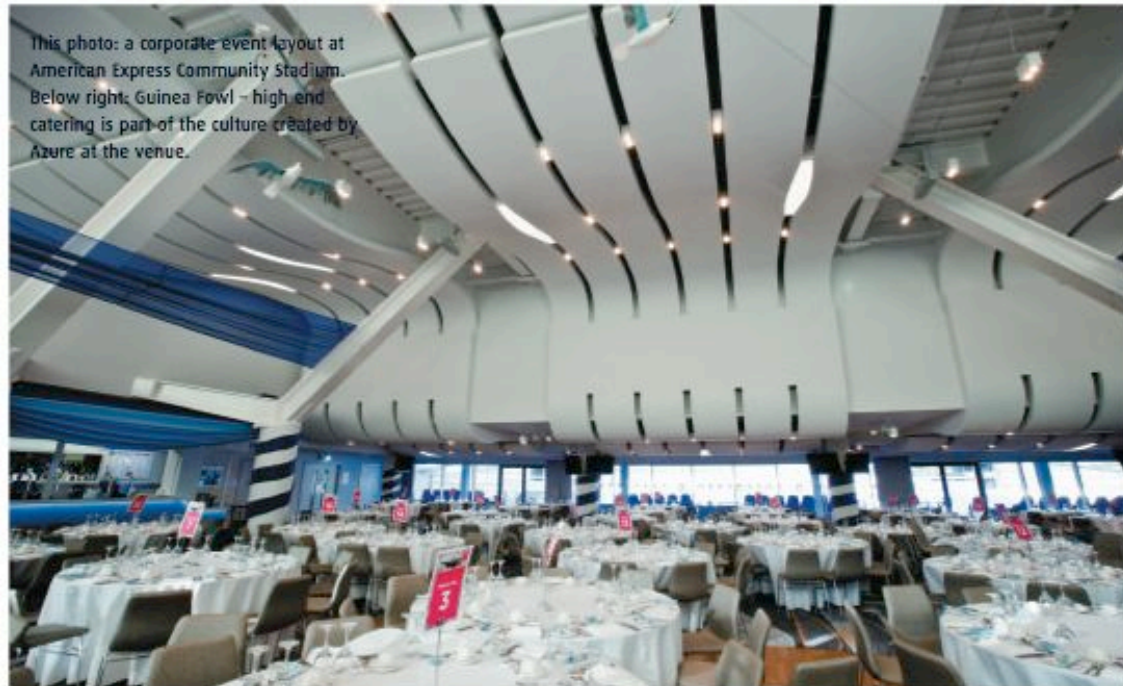
"Opening day is a great experience, quite nerve-wracking," says Elliott Moore, General Manager (catering) at the Amex stadium. "Anything that can go wrong does go wrong – shutters don't open, power cuts...I've done a few so I knew what was coming when we opened Amex. The stadium was full, there was full hospitality and our client also asked us to build a marquee outside the stadium and serve 500 additional guests."

A few months earlier, Moore arrived at Amex Community Stadium when it was still a building site, having been employed by Azure, the specialist stadia division of contract caterer Eilor UK and the company awarded the contract

at Brighton & Hove Albion's new home.

"When you open a new stadium, expectations are high, from fans, staff, the client. There are lots of people to please, lots of balls to juggle," says Moore. "Fortunately customers are very understanding and fair with staff. At Amex we did a lot of work to inform the fans that opening day was also a test event. We did a lot of training with staff to improve their knowledge of the stadium, where the toilets are, where to find a programme seller, so that our catering staff could be helpful to customers in an unfamiliar environment."

"Recruitment has been a big success story here," says Moore. "We set out to not use



This photo: a corporate event layout at American Express Community Stadium. Below right: Guinea Fowl – high end catering is part of the culture created by Azure at the venue.

agency staff, which is not easy when we need 600 people on a matchday." Ninety percent of staff come from the local area, which is a big boost for the economy and community involvement. Moore explains: "We recruited on the basis of 'can do' attitude rather than on skill set, which really helped us. We decided that we could train staff how to use a till or pour wine."

A team of development chefs from Azure worked alongside architects KSS. The kitchen designers came well recommended – they had previously worked on kitchens for TV chef Gordon Ramsey. Moore arrived after the initial build: "It is very well thought-out here. I didn't have to change anything fundamental, just move around a few things. Each of our nine hospitality lounges has its own kitchen. It's not like in some stadiums where everything is prepped in a central kitchen."

The hospitality offering – the 1901 club with 2,600 members – is aimed at small to medium sized businesses, with affordable packages and easy payment plans.

The Q word

Moore explains that his priority is product quality. Fans wash down their homemade pies with ales from local brewery Harveys. Azure's deal with pouring rights partner Heineken achieved two important aims, to compete on price with local pubs and to not compromise on beer quality. The bars therefore use standard kit, not fast pour. "We sell more real ale than lager," says Moore. "We work with CAMRA to source a guest beer from the away team's region for each game." This is a first in UK football and the stadium is about to welcome a visit from beer quality consultant Cask Marque. From the sales at the ground the club intends to create a 'beer league table' to find out which is the footy fans' favourite brew.

The stadium opens two hours before kick-off and closes two hours after the end of the game. The concourses are decorated with artwork from local artists and there are plenty of plasma screens so, with good service, food and beer, there's every reason for fans to meet up in the stadium.

Moore continues: "Quality food and drink is key to our offer so we're working in partnership with local baker Joanna Philips from Piglet's Pantry to create our own Albion Pies, which are baked on-site and presented in an attractive Albion-branded box."

Gourmet burgers, street food and high quality snacks are also on offer at 15 kiosks. There is also a strong focus on healthy options. Catherine Roe, Managing Director of contracts at Elior, adds: "Our aim is to deliver pleasure

Brewers' brands still great fit for venues

InBev UK Limited, the UK trading arm of leading global brewer Anheuser-Busch InBev, is now the official beer partner for **The NEC Group**, which includes: the LG Arena, The National Indoor Arena, The National Exhibition Centre and The International Convention Centre.

An exclusive Stella Artois Bar opened last month at the LG Arena to welcome the partnership. The deal also means InBev UK's beers, including Stella Artois, Budweiser, Beck's and Boddingtons, will be available to the four million annual visitors who attend events, conferences and exhibitions at the NEC Group's venues. The Stella Artois Bar is the biggest in forumLIVE and complements a range of established facilities such as restaurants, further bars, digital screens and music – plus the fast pour pumps that can serve up an impressive six pints in seven seconds.

Guy Dunstan, General Manager the NEC Group's Arenas (pictured right) said: "Stella Artois is a household name and Anheuser-Busch InBev one of the world's biggest brewers, so it's great that they have seen the marketing potential associated with the LG Arena and The NIA.

"Our partnerships with LG and now Anheuser Busch InBev demonstrate the appeal of live entertainment to global brand owners and we will work hard to make sure that our partnerships are huge success stories for our customers and for the region."

Joby Mortimer, National Account Manager On Trade Wholesale said: "Our agreement with The NEC Group is in line with our global vision to be associated with high-profile, top-quality events and venues. Ensuring that our brands are available within venues that reflect this vision is of key importance to us. We look forward to working with The NEC Group and driving success together."

BC Place has concluded a multi-year agreement with PepsiCo Canada for exclusive beverage supply rights for all non-alcoholic beverages at BC Place. PepsiCo Canada's bottle, can, and fountain products will be prominently displayed and served during all public events at BC Place under this agreement.

"We couldn't be more proud of our partnership with BC Place," says Kurtis McCartney, Vice President and General Manager, Western Canada, PepsiCo Canada. "It's a great honour to serve our family of beverages to the millions of visitors who use the iconic facility each year, and it's always a pleasure to do business with organisations which truly embrace partnership."

"We've had a great working relationship with PepsiCo Canada, which has been our exclusive supplier for more than 25 years," adds Howard Crosley, General Manager of BC Place. "We're delighted that our close working relationship will continue, as we open the doors on the new BC Place and head into a whole new era together."



and joy to consumers and our offer at Brighton is designed to give fans a great customer experience."

Moore manages a team of 20 full-time staff at the stadium, with all staff, other than non-matchday specialists, working on game day and joined by temporary supervisors and servers. The team carefully monitors the fan forum pages online and invites bloggers and fan representatives to see behind the scenes so that they understand the logistics of serving so many people in such a short time.

Azure also sells and caters for events such as weddings, conferences, banquets and exhibitions on non-match days. The stadium is well served by road and rail links and is situated between two college campuses. Themed nights at the stadium haven't proved popular but weddings are in demand. Stadium expansion in the summer won't leave many spots free but there's room in June for a couple of nights of Fat Boy Slim in concert, a new food service challenge with a different type of audience over a 12-13 hour period.

"It's always evolving and requiring new ideas," says Moore. "Brighton is a foodie town, with between 900 and 1,000 restaurants. Customers are very aware of food trends and



At American Express Community Stadium, Azure has lifted traditional products with distinctive packaging and locally-sourced ingredients.

prices and therefore we are in a competitive environment."

Business imperatives

FCSI consultant Robert Read, owner of Robert Read Associates, didn't work on the Amex Community Stadium project but he notes the steady flow of partnerships between stadium operators and specialist caterers. Operators need the ability of large caterers to ride economic storms and to be flexible with their permanent and temporary personnel. Caterers can also train and grow staff throughout their organisation, something which is more difficult to do on a single site. Read's company helped tender the contract at Liberty Stadium in Swansea, where the club is involved in a profit share agreement with Compass, and Read notes recent joint ventures entered into at UK cricket stadiums.

"A joint venture takes out the 'us and them'," says Read while noting that sport and leisure contracts do require controls that are different from other catering deals. "If you get the heads of terms right, what's wrong with a long-term contract?" he asks. "A short-term contract can lead to short-term thinking. In a three-year contract, it's first year to learn, second to get a profit and third year working out withdrawal."

"In-house is potentially more profitable but unlocking the potential is a real problem," says Read, whose business has consulted for a wide variety of venues in the UK. He contends that there is always some improvement that can be made to a food and beverage operation and

that there should be more emphasis on getting the basics right before getting carried away with inventive food offerings. Basics include achieving consistency, excellence in packaging and presentation, acceptable pricing and correct layout of concessions.

Read says he isn't always impressed by the layouts he sees, including fundamental mistakes such as placing a kiosk opposite an entrance to toilets. He encourages venues to be positive when considering the needs of the caterer. For example, to work together to make sure that remote condiment stations can be correctly sited, increasing throughput at the concessions without causing any blockage to concourses. He urges that safe plastic bottles are allowed to be sold rather than insisting on pouring drinks, which causes delay and possible danger of queuing across concourses.

Improvement means investment of cash and owners do tend to underestimate what's involved to deliver quality at speed. "It's capital intensive but has proved money well spent," says Read, acknowledging that technology like fast pour systems for beer and machines that can make thousands of coffees are not cheap. Caterers are naturally not wasteful but they also need to speculate to match the intensive demand at half-time in a game. "If the product is not ready, they are wasting sales," he points out.

It's important not to get bogged down by existing culture either. At Aviva Stadium in Dublin, the drink of choice is Guinness but the culture in the pubs is to pour the pint slowly and to let it stand. In Aviva Stadium on matchday, staff pour a Guinness in a few seconds because, if they didn't, most customers

Healthy trends

Following the launch of the UK Government's Responsibility Deal, Compass Group UK & Ireland has made a number of pledges which continue to put health and wellbeing at the heart of its business. One of these pledges is a commitment to reducing salt in the food it serves; government targets are to reduce salt by a further 15% by the end of 2012.

In an industry first, Compass is decreasing the size of salt sachets by 25% from 0.8g to 0.6g. Mick Hickman, Foodservice Director at Compass Group UK & Ireland, comments: "This is an industry leading move, and is undoubtedly a really simple and effective way to help people reduce their daily salt intake and take healthier steps towards a balanced diet, all without them even really noticing." Compass has analysed over 2,000 recipes to ensure accurate nutritional information in the form of GDAs can now be provided to customers. In addition, more than 4,000 product specifications are being reviewed to ensure all artificial trans fats have been removed from the food served.

would miss out. "Customers will compromise and have realistic expectations in the venue environment, as long as the product is good quality, and it is served within an acceptable time by pleasant staff," summarises Read.

"There's no magic wand when it comes to menus," says Read. "It's about delivering traditional products faster, with better quality, and better presented - evolution not revolution." Traditional products can be given a boost. For example the Delia effect (TV chef Delia Smith was until recently a director) at Norwich's Carrow Road Stadium means the pies are freshly baked on site. For concourse catering, Read favours kiosks which serve liquor with a bit of food or food with a bit of liquor. "Single product kiosks are best for speed and getting the logistics right. Although sometimes a one-stop shop is needed. It depends on the venue and the speed of service required."

Read's company covers a very broad spectrum in its consulting, from planning new and redeveloped facilities, to creating tender documents on behalf of operators, and reviewing, monitoring and driving performance. The planning gets down to details such as counter length per 1,000 spectators, how many bars and where to site the cellars. The company can also see each project through to fruition.

"Ideally we'd like to be involved at an early stage," says Read. At Liberty Stadium, he suggested swapping two floors to provide more space for a function suite. "Architects have lots to deliver and there's competition for space and I don't know any project yet that had an unlimited budget," he adds. "We are aiming to achieve a balanced blend between competing factors." He mentions Twickenham South Stand as a highly successful project that allowed cellarmen, chefs and front of house staff to collaborate early on.

The company has evolved a system of audit over 21 years in the business and can help venues benchmark their performance, undertaking a quarterly review for example and helping with service level agreements. "We've done thousands of audit periods so we have good data," says Read. One of his company's audits will highlight good performance as well as bad but will also result in an action list for improvement.

Below: Edgbaston's new main stand is designed to provide non-matchday revenue. A long-term deal with Compass unlocks the many opportunities.



Read gives York Racecourse and Twickenham as outstanding examples. "Twickenham has had some pretty spectacular results in public catering improvement," he says. "Matchday revenue is unrecognisable from 10 years ago."

Partnerships prevalent

Compass Group UK and Ireland's Sport, Leisure and Hospitality recognises the value of a long-term relationship and a joint venture. Its latest deal, with Warwickshire County Cricket Club, is for 12 years and is worth up to £10 million in annual revenue. Selling and marketing, especially for non matchday, now combines with the catering side. The new venture, which will trade as Edgbaston Experience Ltd, will see Compass provide all retail and hospitality food service for a conference and banqueting business which attracts up to 200,000 visitors per year. Selling of match-day corporate hospitality is through Compass' Keith Prowse business.

Craig Flindall, Finance Director at Warwickshire Cricket Club, explains the club's motivation: "This is another important and progressive development for the Club which will help us deliver a first class customer experience to our visitors on both cricket days and for conferences and banqueting events. The willingness of a FTSE 100 company like Compass to invest in Edgbaston demonstrates the strength of our proposition both now and more importantly going forward".

Neil MacLaurin, Sales Director Sport, Leisure and Hospitality at Compass Group UK and Ireland, adds "We operate similar successful partnerships at iconic sporting venues including as The Kia Oval and Twickenham Stadium and are pleased to add Edgbaston to this portfolio. We look forward to working in partnership with Warwickshire to drive consistent quality at a wonderful venue."

Port Vale and Azure UK have concluded a deal for Azure to provide all catering and conference services, with all catering staff continuing to work at Vale Park as employees of the Elior Group.

Port Vale Chief Executive Perry Deakin explains: "Azure's expertise across the entire catering and events spectrum ensures a high quality catering service for the club over the next five years and I am incredibly excited about the partnership which, in addition, will deliver unprecedented revenues for the club in this area of our business. To secure an agreement with a company of Azure's quality and reputation is a major coup for the club and its confidence in the Port Vale brand has been a major factor during negotiations."

Menu matchup

Centerplate hosted the 99th Grey Cup in Vancouver in November at the revitalised BC Place stadium.

Centerplate is hospitality provider to the home fields for both Grey Cup finalists, the BC Lions and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. The company served over 54,000 fans, offering specialty food and beverage menus reflecting Vancouver's culinary style.



Centerplate's Executive Chef Ryan Stone invited his fellow members of Team BC, British Columbia's competitive culinary team, to consult on his special menu for the game. The team presented three stations, in addition to traditional fan favourites:

Lightly Maple Smoked Steelhead - served in feta paper with confit fennel and fingerling potatoes.

Indian Spiced Lamb Chops - served with basil coulis, sumac yogurt and fried eggplant chips.

Barbeque Pork Belly Sliders - topped with apple relish, house-made mustard served on parkerhouse rolls.

Representing the flavours of Vancouver were dishes including:

English Meat Pie - made for Centerplate by Vancouver's Mark Crest Bakery, based on a traditional English recipe, but using braised short rib as a contemporary twist.

Battered Fish and Chips - created in partnership with local seafood company, Ocean Mama.

Suite holders enjoyed a special game menu designed in partnership with several of Vancouver's leading chefs including Chef Tomoki Yamasaki, Chef Vikram Vij, Pastry Chef Thomas Haas and Charcuterie Master Drews Driessen.

"We are proud to serve as hospitality provider to one of this country's defining athletic events," says James Findlay, Centerplate's General Manager responsible for the game.

"This is a great opportunity to serve our partners with the level of committed service and extraordinary guest experiences people have come to expect from Centerplate."