



‘I know that I’m just part of the food chain. So if I stop ordering from my suppliers, then that’s a problem for them’

Acclaimed chef Barry Bryson was enjoying his busiest year before the pandemic cleared his order book. But like many in the hospitality industry, he soon found new ways to work including online and providing fine dining at home, writes **Liv McMahon**

A chef and business owner whose name you might typically associate with prestige catering, having catered for the likes of Louis Vuitton and Rolls-Royce, Barry Bryson has taken the challenge of making a little luxury go a long way this year in his stride.

“I’m very fortunate that before 2020, I worked in a part of the market that is deemed luxury,” Barry Bryson explains to me as we reflect on the blur of the year gone by, “but I’m really aware, like everybody else, that this isn’t the year to focus on luxury, but instead on sustenance and provision.”

Having recently returned to the kitchen at Jupiter Artland’s Cafe Party, where he was previously stationed between 2009-2013, it is clear that accessibility remains at the forefront of Barry’s mind wherever he finds himself at the moment; the economic turmoil of this year reaffirming for him the importance of communicating with customers and facilitating the joy of cooking.

“One of the things that I’ve been really conscious of doing, whether it has been with the ready meals or with the brunch menu or with the cafe at Jupiter Artland, is to make it as accessible as pos-

sible for people. I can cook creatively, yes, but I am also cooking with the fact in mind that this is a difficult time for everybody. And I don’t want to not acknowledge that in my kitchen.”

Throughout the pandemic Barry turned to social media to fill the gaps left by the suspension of our normal, everyday lives. Instagram became a way for him to stay grounded and connected; bonding with users who likewise found cooking to be a source of comfort in a time of crisis. “I’ve had a much more interactive year than I probably ever had, which is strange considering it’s been a year of isolation,” he tells me. “I wake up every day feeling very fortunate. Not only that I’m still cooking, but that I still have a routine way of talking to customers.”

For Barry, lockdown hit doubly hard after he started the year on a high. “I had what’s probably been the busiest diary I’ve ever had at the beginning of 2020,” he explains “then just 10 weeks

later found myself staring at an empty diary and wondering what we were going to do.” But in pivoting to provide at-home dinners to customers himself via door to door delivery, Barry was able to immerse himself in a new way of working.

“I’m a firm believer that I can’t explain how to do something to somebody else, unless I’ve done it myself,” Barry says, adding “if I have an idea for a business or want somebody to do it with me, the best way for me to learn is to put myself out there. So I personally cooked and delivered all of it.”

The last few months have seen the chef explore new horizons in more ways than one. When restrictions began to gradually lift over summer and into autumn, Barry’s focus shifted. “I’ve got great friends in the trade who are obviously facing the same problems as I am, so thought: ‘How can we work together through this really complicated tier system?’” This led him to collaborate with

Greek restaurant Spitaki. “It’s been amazing to find myself selling out four nights in a Greek restaurant on a tasting menu. It’s something I would have never seen myself doing before this year.”

From there, he went onto Jupiter Artland and Honeycomb & Co – teaming up with the Bruntsfield eaterie to provide a weekly fine dining at home winter menu.

“Basically, this has been my year of connecting with lots of other businesses, not just to keep them going but also my suppliers too,” Barry says. “At the end of the day, I know that I’m just part of the food chain. So if I stop ordering from my suppliers, then that’s a problem for them, too.”

It’s easy to forget, he notes, in all the discussion of pubs and supermarkets, just how “devastating” the knock-on impact of empty restaurants and cafes has been for independent producers and suppliers in Scotland. “It’s heartbreaking because the industry is designed for people to come in and to be introduced to those producers through our menus,” he says.

With Christmas fast approaching and a new year finally in sight, Barry is optimistic about the future. “I’m very proud of my fellow chefs, restaurateurs, and everyone in hospitality, because they’ve really responded well and their efforts have been phenomenal despite the lack of support.”

At the same time, he recognises that even his own buoyant optimism has its limits: “We have to be realistic and think about how much longer we can all keep adapting like this? Most of us at the moment are running on 20 per cent of our annual turnover.”

After a year which has, for

↑ A fine dining dish, above, from chef Barry Bryson, main, who has set up a dine at home business during the pandemic and collaborated with restaurants for pop-up nights when restrictions allowed

Barry, been “honestly life changing”, visualising the future is a difficult task. “You learn a lot about yourself in times of crisis,” he tells me, noting that he hopes people remember to support each other and support local businesses as much as possible both over Christmas and the unpredictable year ahead.

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