

## From Russia with love

Out with the old and in with the new. I hope 2011 brings you everything you wish for. As I look back at 2010, I want to share with you what has got to be the biggest highlight for me in a professional capacity – a week long trip to Perm in Russia to open the country's first ever purpose built fish and chip shop. At first, the thought of travelling 3,000 miles to a place that rarely gets above minus 30 in the winter may not blow your skirt up but when I tell you that in 2010, I published my first book on fish and chips, opened my own fifth Petrou Brothers chippy, saw my idea of getting the whole industry celebrating 150 years of fish and chips become a reality (thanks to the resources of the NFFF) and threw what has to be one of the best trade social events for years (Chippychat Christmas Ball) and this trip beats all four of them hands down, I hope you will read on.

The UK. Eight hundred miles long by three hundred miles wide (approx) and with en thousand fish and chip shops. A hot food retail market saturated by competition, A brand that has been around for a century and a half, but one that has been eclipsed by huge marketing machines and left for dust as the Burger Boys sped away with our children. Profit margins sacrificed to remain competitive, Portions made bigger to maintain market share and a workforce that is better off staying at home, becoming pregnant or being ill.

Russia. A sixth of the world's land mass - spanning TEN different time zones. The Iron Curtain was taken down just twenty years ago and now independent enterprise is on the menu. The hot food retail market is an acorn destined to be the mightiest oak ever. The Ruskies have heard of fish

and chips but there is no prejudice here to overcome - just a desire to embrace it and accept the messages we want to promote about it. A nation of average built healthy folk – hardly any one over eats and any worker who works for an entrepreneur instead of making Russian cars or mopping Russian floors or any other role for the state is grateful. Very grateful indeed. So grateful they will work whenever, wherever and as hard as is required to keep the boss happy, because it is a good opportunity to lead a life that could deliver a bit more than an ordinary one.

I arrived – five hours into the future ahead of UK time after travelling for a full day. It was colder than the welcome to a gate-crashing pork pie at a Jewish wedding. My driver and interpreter were both waiting to carry my bag and whisk me off to my 4 star Russian accommodation. Perm is a hidden city – the sixth largest in Russia (population 1.2 million) and the most eastern city in Europe, buried just before the Ural Mountains and beyond that Siberia. Formally known as Molotov, it is mineral rich and home to most of Russia's weapons building and military supply facilities. Western culture and influence is seeping in but even after my short trip, I already feel that Russia has far more to offer the rest of the world than it is ever likely to benefit from us by opening its doors. Despite the risk of losing all the cod that the Russian boats supply to the UK, if Russia wants fish and chips then no one is going to stop it from happening and I wanted to make sure they did the product justice.

The circumstances that led to my appointment were neither by chance nor coincidence. Two companies well known and respected in the frying community were invited to tender for the contract for supplying the frying equipment to Alendvic and both suggested that I would be the ideal candidate for training, and so for me it was a one horse race.

Alendvic are no Mickey Mouse outfit, let me tell you. Started just seventeen years ago by its founder Alexander, he now boasts title to over 200 food courts in shopping centres in St.Petersburg, Moscow, Perm and Kazakhstan, already merchandising 11 different brands from these sites including Southern fried chicken, Baskin



Above: The view from the fourth floor of the shopping centre. Perm. Russia. Minus 32 degrees. Brrrrr.

Below left: Alex and Max from the Alendvic management team, behind Olga - Head Chef of the food court - flanked by two of her staff, and Mark with a student frier.

Robbins ice cream and his own Sushi chain, to name but a few. The team of people he has surrounded himself with have Alendvic in their veins. They shine for Alexander every day they breathe and I was humbled and slightly embarrassed to see a level of professionalism and dedication in his workforce that I haven't even had the imagination to dream about in mine.

If I managed to convince a panel of experts that my shop was the best in 2007, then he could do it with any one of his on his worst day. His accountants, marketing department, purchasing team, menu development chefs, site managers, catering crew, counter assistants, pot washers and floor scrubbers all wanted to learn, improve and be better every time I had something to say.

I assumed that my challenges on this trip would be about communicating the technical elements of the art of frying and preaching about the relationship of the meal to all social classes in order to generate a following for it. I couldn't have been more wrong. The willingness to learn was apparent immediately and the acceptance of how I felt fish and chips were best portrayed to a brand new consumer audience was unquestioned.

The real problem on day one was in the last place I had expected to find it – in the raw materials themselves. Take for example the potatoes. An acceptable locally grown white variety. Not too waxy, not too floury, acceptable dry matter content but fried blacker than the inside of a coffin on a moonless night. The fish was Russian

*more overleaf*





## Award Winning Training

### ■ Introducing

**The School of Frying Excellence** introduced to you by **KFE Ltd.**

We are no ordinary training academy. Our training staff are Fish & Chip of the Year winners and our premises are purpose built to the highest standards of design and hygiene, incorporating only the very best equipment and ingredients.



### ■ Staff

We are proud to introduce our award winning staff.



**Nigel Hodgson**



**Mark Petrou**



**Gordon Hillan**

### ■ Lesson Objectives

KFE have joined forces with award winning friers and an EHO officer to develop a school of frying excellence for potentially new and established friers.

On the KFE School of Frying Excellence you will learn and experience:

- Potato sourcing and preparation
- Fish sourcing and preparation
- Batter options and preparation
- Accompaniment preparation
- Frying techniques and options
- Management of the frying medium
- HACCP (Hazard analysis and critical control points)
- Basic Food Hygiene Qualification CIEH Level 2 in Food Safety
- Marketing , customer care, advertising and sponsorship
- Packaging, sundries and sauces

Cost: **2 Day Course: £575.00** exclusive of VAT

**Recommended by the  
National Federation  
of Fish Friers and  
Seafish.**



### ■ How to Apply

For further information, prices and to apply please contact Avril Williams.

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cod. Caught in the Barents sea. Individually quick frozen though, with an inch thick glaze that once defrosted revealed gaping, dull fillets that my cat would walk away from.

I broke the news to Yulia, head of purchasing in my own way – “If you start with poor quality potatoes and poor quality fish, the very best you will be able to produce is poor quality fish and chips.” I needed to understand why the raw materials were so bad and they needed to understand the difference between good and bad and how to spot them and overcome them. We had figured it out in under an hour. In respect of the potatoes, the farmer had harvested them correctly, stored them at an optimum temperature but only single sheeted them for the three hour drive to Alendvic’s depot. At minus thirty outside, the spuds had caught a rotten stinking cold in transit. The starch had irreversibly turned to sugar which caramelised in the pan. I showed Ulga (head chef) how to blanch at low temperatures to avoid colour as much as possible but the real solution was to solve the transportation issue so that frost free spuds were being used.

The poor fish problem was a bigger issue. Having Russian boats catching in the Barents sea and freezing at sea made me think that all we needed to do was contact the vessel owner and buy a pallet of the good stuff. Job done. Then Yulia informed me that Perm was three thousand miles inland and in fact England was closer for these Russian boats to supply than they were. Luckily, Alendvic is a big company with big resources and had they been anything else, I’m sure poor quality fish would have been on the menu for the rest of my stay. Again the lessons about FAS versus IQF, paying for glaze instead of fish, the pros of using frozen at sea and how to spot good quality fish from bad were soaked up like a sponge. Sure enough by day two we were working with much better quality raw materials (perhaps someone drove through the night) and I looked forward to a more positive day of development.

We made homemade fishcakes, mushy peas, curry sauce and batter from local flour as well as proper English tea. I showcased salt and vinegar and tartare sauce and finally developed solid founda-

tions for customer service procedures as well as revealing how we sell fish and chips to children along with loyalty schemes and other promotional techniques. In the evening I was lucky enough to dine with four beautiful women from the marketing department. We discussed at great length how I would launch fish and chips if it were my shop in Russia.

Day Three and I arrived at work to learn that I had made such an impression on the marketing department that they had invited Russian TV to come and interview me, along with a reporter from Perm’s biggest newspaper. I had learned the previous evening that MacDonalDs were on their way to Perm in the Spring. I had the opportunity to do something that day in Russia that our whole Industry failed to do back in 1974 and that was get in the first punch and nail Ronald MacDonalD to a cross.

My message was simple – fish and chips is an honest, value for money, delicious meal. Harvested from nature, lower in fat and sugar than MacDonalDs with no hidden nasties and still resembling the ingredients they are made, from it is clear to see why it has been the nation’s favourite meal in the UK and virtually unchanged for over a century and a half. “The figures speak for themselves, Burgers are bad – look how fat the Americans are!” I said. “MacdonalDs is run by a clown. Young children love fish and chips.” I said.

I went on to explain how the new electric pans worked, how temperature virtually stayed the same during frying – reducing fat absorption - and how the meal was made from Russian potatoes and Russian fish by Russian people for Russian people but celebrating a much loved British tradition because it represents an affordable treat for everyone.

Day four we opened and we kicked ass.

It was an honour to go. Russia is just about big enough for me to live in with my big head. What a good a company Alendvic was to work with! They are going places with their brand and will open many, many more sites over the coming months. The range company sent their engineer Simon ahead of me to make sure the equipment was commissioned and working perfectly. He is an asset to them and I am pleased that he is installing my

*“If you start with poor quality potatoes and poor quality fish, the very best you will be able to produce is poor quality fish and chips.”*



*Top: Russian fried battered fish, potato scollops, fish sticks and home made fishcakes.*

*Above: The impressive sight that greets you as you come up the escalator from third floor. Note the menu board - five fully animated screens that are uploaded everyday from memory sticks. Simple but so effective*



new range in a few weeks time at my latest site in Cambridge city centre. Their electric ranges are incredibly fast – much faster than gas ranges - and I learned so much about myself and the business from this trip that it hardly seems fair to charge them for going, but I will do because love still doesn’t pay the bills. I could write and write and write about how much I gained from going but I have knocked out five pages in no time at all and that’s at least twice my normal allowance per issue.

Did I mention that nobody over eats in Russia? What reminds me - the portion size for a piece of fish there is just 90 grams. It’s like chip shop heaven over there.

I want to go back. Please can I go again?

**Editors Note:**

*Mark Petrou made the trip to Perm on behalf of and at the request of KFE Limited*