

Belfast's Bread Winners

Former French Village bakery owner, Henry French has reversed the tables and turned small business woes into a massive success story. Here he talks to Emma Deighan about why he's now the preferred bread and baked goods supplier for some of Belfast's most renowned eating establishments.

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“I opened a retail outlet in Stranmillis in 1981 and never looked back,” began Henry when recalling the journey that French Village has travelled over the past 28 years.

Henry has a strong background in the bakery industry having worked with Ormo for 17 years, Sunblest for five years and Irwins for three years.

He then set out on his own and opened a retail outlet in the leafy Stranmillis area of Belfast where he quickly became known as ‘the French Bread Man’ while his product portfolio became the talk of the town.

But the adversities facing many independent traders meant it soon became too difficult for Henry to survive in the retail field and he closed shop in 2003. But instead of becoming a casualty of hard times, Henry entered the hospitality supply chain.

“I saw the writing on the wall,” he continues “Rent rates in Stranmillis started to go through the roof and when that happens there is really no potential for negotiation with landlords.

“Then a one-way system was put in the area and that killed a lot of my business as parking became impossible.

“But before we closed, we were selling through the back door to businesses and eventually it got to the stage where more was going out the back of the store than through the front so we knew we had enough business to move on and sustain what we’re doing now.”

Henry shut his shop door on a Saturday in 2003 and began operating a supplier service under the same name from his factory in Alambrooke Industrial Park in East Belfast the following Monday.

The transition from retail to supply was so seamless that there were no regrets.

“There are few businesses in this world that would be able to do what we did. We never missed a customer in that whole moving



process. And although it was jolly hard work I never looked back,” adds Henry.

French Village’s customers are no longer Joe Public, but more a collection of top Belfast eateries who Henry describes as friends with whom he has built formidable rapport.

These include everything from the finest restaurants in Belfast, exclusive delis, and one-off greengrocers to pubs. He can count Aldens, Ten Square and James Street South as some of his highest profile clients and among his newest customers, The Grand Opera House.

Talking about his impressive customer base he says, “We tend to associate ourselves with

upmarket businesses because we have an upmarket product and quality service.

“We also stick to the Belfast area because logistically we need to be clever and keep things compact, selling as much as we can within our own confines, rather than getting one decent order out of town which takes up a lot of time.

“This method means we can do three to four runs a day and we don’t have any quantity limits meaning clients can order as little as £5 worth of goods. I suppose you could say we get down to the nitty gritty where the big boys can’t.”

This business strategy means French Village is the first bespoke bakery supplier in Belfast who can offer made-to-order pallets of any size within a 24-hour timeframe.

"The scale of our business, and the format in which we run it means we can tailor make for any of our customers, should that be making loaves bigger, baps smaller or producing a whole new product just for them.

"That's the beauty of being a bakery, you don't have to bring in new tools to adapt to demand and requests," he says.

French Village doesn't provide its customers with a product list because of the sheer diversity of its range. Instead it allows its customers to dictate.

But it isn't Henry who is creating the ever-growing French Village bakery offering, it is in fact his son, Ashley who along side his other son Mark are running the business as Henry enjoys retirement.

Ashley has mastered many fantastic gourmet breads and baked goods that are in a league of their own.

His attention to detail is impeccable, right down to the very wrapper of his muffins and the aesthetics of his recently introduced cupcakes. He has revamped old classics and launched new ranges.

Alongside the fanciful products is a bread range of which 'people can't get enough' says Henry. Ashley also produces speciality breads, traybakes, cakes, apple tarts, coconut fingers and even Matleaser squares which you might find in many cafes throughout Belfast.

He has also recently started a stall in St George's Market every Friday to allow the public to once again enjoy the delights of French Village in a nod to the roots of the business.

It will be Ashley and his brother Mark, alongside their sister Amy who will be responsible for the future of French Village.

Between them, they will grow connections with the hospitality trade in Belfast, boost their identity in the market, and continue the legacy that Henry started, but within boundaries.

Ashley says he doesn't want to expand too far out of Belfast, he likes the setup that he has established while there is enough custom coming his way from within the city's perimeters and this is even before French Village embarks on any marketing.

Amy French will return home from a post in England to undertake a marketing role in the business but Henry remains somewhat old-fashioned in his views to how the company is promoted, and why wouldn't he be, traditional methods have been successful in summoning so much business in the past.

"Our business has grown through word of mouth. I believe that is the most invaluable tool and we're very proud of that and very happy to continue going along with that type of marketing.



Mark, Henry and Ashley French

"Some people may argue that word of mouth is not marketing but it's probably the best promotion you can get for a local company," he adds.

But the future of the business and how it is marketed will lie with Ashley mostly; whose passion and enthusiasm for what he does is undoubtedly going to be the key to his success.

Already within his time of taking hold of the reins, he has outgrown his single factory unit in Alanbrooke Park and just recently acquired a neighbouring unit.

To cope with increasing demand Ashley will invest in a new oven system and maintain his

pitch at St George's Market. He will also look towards growing staff numbers.

Other future plans include the creation of a logo for the company - which is a current topic of hot debate within French Village - Henry wants something elaborate and reflective of the name and nature of the company, while graphic designers are looking at a simpler emblem.

But this will be left up to the successors of French Village concludes Henry, "The future plans of the company are now Mark and Ashley's. I'm a free agent now. I can go out and play tennis and have more holidays," he laughs. **LCN**

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