

Stand by your Grand

... and show the world you love her. With passion, innovation, big ideas and outspoken opinions, Jeremy Rata – one of the UK's top hoteliers – reveals his plans to drag the De Vere Grand in Brighton back to greatness

A NUMBER OF BIG-NAME HOTELIERS ARE likely to be very annoyed by this feature. Others in the business may feel like cheering.

Jeremy Rata, new general manager of the 201-bedroom, five-star De Vere Grand in Brighton, told me before we met for the interview that he would be outspoken – and he certainly was.

While many in the hotel world have strong opinions (thank goodness), Rata's carry the weight of his achievements. These include the transformation of the Devonshire Arms in North Yorkshire into one of Britain's best hotels and being chairman of the Academy of Food and Wine, overseeing its efforts to train and educate the UK's food and beverage serving staff.

So it was with some curiosity that I arrived in Brighton on a blustery October day – only to be unexpectedly invited into a crisis meeting. A fire in a boiler flue the previous Sunday, 14 October, had cut off the heating and hot water. The hotel had had to close its doors to guests.

The décor was unharmed, but the fire brigade had ripped out the offending flue and water was dripping through the ceiling outside Rata's ground-floor office. Key members of staff had to step over buckets to cram into the room.

With the Grand's reopening now delayed until the following Monday, Rata needed to manage issues such as staffing hours, what to say to the public, when to accept new bookings and what maintenance work could be carried out with guests conveniently out of the way.

Once the meeting was over, Rata took me on a tour of the eerily empty hotel, where the smell of

smoke still lingered. And he wasted little time in delivering his promised rant.

Much of what Rata said is, unfortunately, unprintable for legal reasons. But the gist of his argument is that in order to satisfy investors, the Grand's owner, the Alternative Hotel Group, is obliged to maintain profitability levels similar to those achieved by De Vere before AHG took over for £1.1 billion in August last year, so it's difficult to find the leeway to reinvest. "This place brings in a fortune and it would be a very brave person who says forget all that for a couple of years."

The problem, Rata says, is that unless heavy reinvestment takes place, returns will diminish. "You can't keep banging in high levels of profit with an average rate that has no sign of being able to grow exponentially, because this hotel is f***ed. There's no other way of describing it. And it's f***ed because there's been no major capital investment on this building for far too long."

HIGH COST OF UNDERINVESTMENT

To illustrate his point, Rata takes me to the conservatory at the front of the hotel that forms part of its King's Restaurant. The Venetian blinds are stained, the chairs look cheap, the waiters' station looks like it came from a junk shop, the carpet is worn right through in places and on one of the windows is a length of broken white plastic trunking. It looks like a restaurant in a war zone, rather than one overlooking the sea in the only five-star hotel in Brighton. It's a disgrace, and Rata says he is "ashamed" of it.

Penny-pinching is widespread in the hotel business, Rata thinks. When I mention staying at the Sheraton Edinburgh, where my room was dowdy and lights didn't work, he says: "I can't stand people like [several prominent figures in the industry and heads of major hotel groups]. They get feted in the industry as being great people and good backers and all that, but I wouldn't want to stay in one of their hotels..."

"People like that drive me nuts, because they get feted by *The Caterer* – a publication I'm not very fond of, because it builds these people up who haven't got a passion for the business."



“It was done by educating customers that every time they came back they’d see something different being done. That’s what I want for the Grand”

It’s short-termism that Rata’s against, not the idea of making money. His attitude is informed by his experience at the Devonshire Arms, where he worked for owners the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire for 11 years. He says half the profits were put back in, gradually turning a three-star property with a two-rossette restaurant into a four-star hotel ranked in the UK’s top 15, offering Michelin-starred food and one of the country’s best wine lists. Occupancy percentages rose from the mid 50s to the high 60s, and room rates went from £80 to £170 – without breakfast or VAT.

“It was done by educating our customers that every time they came back they’d see something different being done. I met with Robert Cook (chief executive of Malmaison and Hotel du Vin and a partner in AHG) today and I said that’s what I want to do at the Grand every month.”

LIGHTHOUSE AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

And Rata has started to make his mark. The first thing he did on arriving in July was make-over the narrow island in front of the hotel. He had the concrete flowerpots and their jumble of dead plants ripped out and the area turfed over. He stuck in some tall coloured flags. And he got someone to fix the exterior lamp. Apparently it hadn’t worked for – wait for it – 17 years. It’s hard to understand the persistency of such neglect.

“It cost me £3,000, in the scheme of things, nothing,” Rata says. “It’s had a dual effect: it’s made everyone going past realise something is different at the Grand, and the staff have gone, wow, something’s happening at last, because they’ve had six years of being bulls****ed to by previous owners about what’s going to happen.”

His next idea is a whacky one – to paint a lighthouse or a beach scene Beryl Cook-style on the ugly roof of a glass pavilion that juts out over the ground floor. His thinking is that, with occupancy in the high 70s and 70-odd rooms having balconies overlooking the roof, on any day more than 100 people will look down and laugh at the painting, “and that laugh is going to carry them back to the bedroom and downstairs.

“It makes people realise that someone cares, and that there’s some money – however small – that people are investing back. Why do that? Not because I want to be clever, but because then very subtly I can put a fiver on the rates.” He says that in his experience guests don’t mind paying more if they can see improvements taking place.

To transform the hotel to Rata’s satisfaction would perhaps cost £20 million if done at once, he says, but he would rather spend a million or two every year on a rolling programme, raising rates from the present average of £125 to perhaps £190 while trying to maintain occupancy.



The famous facade: the De Vere Grand's distinctive frontage

Curriculum Vitae: Jeremy Rata

★ **1977** Started in the business, with Trusthouse Forte. Has also worked at various times for Grand Metropolitan, Crest Hotels and InterContinental Hotels.

★ **1994–1996** Manager of Rookery Hall, Cheshire – which had three red stars, three rosettes.

★ **1996–2007** Ran Devonshire Hotels and Restaurants, encompassing two hotels and one gastropub with four

bedrooms, a popular catering venue and an outside catering company. Annual turnover: £8 million. For three years consecutively it was awarded the UK's Best Wine List gong.

★ **July 2007–present** Running the De Vere Grand, Brighton.

ACTIVITIES

★ Head judge of Young Chef/Young Waiter competition

★ Chairman, Academy of Food and Wine
★ Master Innholder
★ Fellow of Institute of Hospitality

OTHER INTERESTS

★ Accredited sports photographer
★ Supporter of Blackburn Rovers Football Club
★ Family: married with two children, Felicity and Harriet, and one grandchild, Ava.

Cover feature

Two trial room redesigns – a suite and a standard bedroom, commissioned before Rata joined – have been installed recently. In the suite the windows whistle noisily (all the hotel's windows need replacing, Rata says), but the room is smart and a sexy, £5,500 two-person teak bath has been placed in front of the window.

But – oh dear! – not only does the bath take an hour and a half to fill, have scum and tide marks that won't come off and totally lack comfort, but anyone using it has to stand on a step and swing a leg over the side, giving their partner an unflattering view of their rear end. A better home for it would be a gynaecologist's office.

Then there's the food and beverage. William Reed, our publisher, has held Christmas parties at the Grand and the banquet food has never failed to disappoint. "Inedible" and "disgusting" are words I've heard to describe it. AHG has said that F&B is at the heart of its plans to overhaul De Vere; in January it appointed Duncan Ackery from Tate Catering as F&B development director, then brought in a group executive chef, David Watson, from the Grand Hyatt hotel in Taipei.

TAKE OUT THE MEAT TO ADD PUBLICITY

Rata needs to work with these and other execs, and says he is under pressure to change the King's Restaurant into a version of Scott's, the fish eatery in London. But Rata would rather do something unusual, and plans to turn it into a smart vegetarian restaurant. How many of those are there in five-star hotels? The inspiration, he says, was popular Brighton eatery Terre à Terre.

"Some people won't eat there – so what?" he says. "This hotel takes 400 people – and the restaurant seats only 200, so we can't do them all anyway. And we can promote it and people will come. I said to Robert Cook today, here is my idea, and he said that's a bloody good call."

If that change gains publicity, so will another – to create a 30-seat fine-dining restaurant at the



The updated suite – and its very unsexy £5,500 bathtub-for-two

back of the hotel. The large, dull room Rata is thinking of could be given zing by creating a bar and kitchen out of the office space next door.

The restaurant could be presided over by a Michelin-starred chef and have extravagantly priced menus. The idea is to "do a Sketch", referring to the London restaurant with food inspired by Pierre Gagnaire and Mourad Mazouz of Momo. "It's got to be something where people pick up a *Sunday Times* magazine or a guidebook and say, 'Where shall we go this weekend?' and the Grand's got the best restaurant in the south of England or in the UK outside of London."

He thinks such a restaurant won't – and doesn't need to – make money. "All you want fine dining for is to sell bedrooms, because the money you make is in bedrooms." How much of a loss is he talking? "Probably £100,000 straight off the bottom line. Gone, just because you've got this poncey restaurant. But you'd get that back in the rooms probably 10 times over."

I ask if he has plans for a spa, to be told he wants to create a huge one in the basement (two-thirds of the hotel's footprint), costing possibly £4 million. Again, he sees this as a way of selling rooms, not as a stand-alone business: "How much money do spas make? Show me one that makes any once you factor in costs. They'll tell you they do but that's bull**** – they lose money, but it cranks up the room rate, so it's justifiable."

It should be fairly clear by now that Rata is what you might call a maverick – something he acknowledges and says De Vere has been seeking

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in managers for its Deluxe properties, to add individuality to its landmark sites.

But even with such intentions, it can be hard for a big firm to accommodate individualists. Although Rata admires "inspirational" Robert Cook and operations director Stephen Carter, he admits he has trouble fitting into a corporate environment and dealing with middle-managers who try to constrain him. Compared with the Devonshire Arms, "I'm not as free to say, 'I know what's going to make this place work and how I can fund it, so can I just get on with it?' There's a bit of that I find quite frustrating. It's not a bad thing, but it's an education process for me."

Why, then, did Rata uproot his family from North Yorkshire to transplant them to the East Sussex coast? Well, he was 48 years old – just enough time left, as he saw it, to be able to take a risk. And it was the hotel. "Such is my passion: I didn't want to join De Vere, but I wanted to run the Brighton Grand." He has loved the hotel ever since visiting it with his father when he was 10. When De Vere approached him via a recruitment agent, he was ready to make the move.

"This is a canvas to beat all canvases. There is nothing in the country that beats this outside of London – nothing." He believes the potential of the business is "astronomic". I do hope the hotel reaches that goal – and Rata with it.



Lamp sum: It waited 17 years to be repaired