

INTERVIEW

Hey PRESTO!

ASADO AND PRESTO RESTAURANTS TAKE LONDON BY STORM

by **AARON PRAGER**

It's not so often that a restaurant can sport consistently high reviews. A kosher restaurant that can elicit hundreds of 5-star ratings is even more impressive. Mr. Yanky Fischer is the joint proprietor of two North London restaurants that have opened within the past three years. And, while he is new to the business, he's created something which has clearly captured the interest of those both near and far.

Hamodia spoke with Mr. Fischer to hear about how he became involved in the restaurant business and the secret behind creating restaurants that boast almost 100% satisfaction.



How did you become involved in the dining business?

I am very passionate about good food and whenever I would travel to a new place, I would try to experience the food that was available in that community. For a long time, I had a dream of opening something to provide the community with a standard of food that had never been experienced before. A number of years ago, my brother Shaye suggested an opportunity for a career change, which happened to be my dream. He wanted to take over a fairly new restaurant which hadn't managed to get off the ground. I was very interested - but only if I would be able to create a fine-dining meaty restaurant experience that had never existed in London before. My brother was already operating both a pizza shop and a fine-dining Italian restaurant in Belgium at the time. We instantly started planning something very special for London.

How did you get started?

We needed to offer something very special for the community. This would require major investment. The next five months involved a complete rework of the aesthetics of the restaurant to produce a venue that spoke for itself. I believe the atmosphere that one feels when one enters a restaurant affects the taste of the food; here, the décor was going to be tasteful and appealing and set the entire tone for the dining experience. But before we could go ahead, I made the crucially important meeting with Kedassia to discuss my plans.

Why was your venture unusual for Kedassia, and how were your plans received?

Kedassia provides a hechsher only if they approve all of the ingredients that are served. When I met with them, I explained that this was going to be something out of the ordinary; we were looking to create a

restaurant that would be a pride of Kedassia as much as for the *kehillah*, and in order to make it work we would need to source new ingredients that had not been approved previously. For example, you can't compare the taste of pre-ground dry herbs with fresh herbs like thyme, rosemary, parsley and coriander. Generally, Kedassia do not give a hechsher for these items and I wasn't sure how they would take to my plan.

They were, however, tremendously amenable, going out of their way to ensure that we would be able to provide the best product in a way that didn't compromise on kashrus at all, even though this meant examining and approving new products. They set up a bespoke system with a *mashgiach*, sending samples of our herbs to a lab to confirm if, and in which season, we would be able to use them. They appreciated our service for the community and have been incredibly helpful. Without their willingness and openness to our vision, there's no way we would have gone ahead. With their approval, we took the lease, and the plans for Asado started falling into place.

What was so unusual about the way you set up Asado?

The thought and effort that has gone into every element of the restaurant's development has been immense. We searched for a chef but were faced with a dilemma: although there was no shortage of chefs available, there are very few who understand both kosher cooking and fine dining.

We weren't looking to offer the basics: burgers, chips, cholent and kugel but equally, someone who had no experience in a kosher kitchen wouldn't be able to adapt their culinary knowledge to our specific needs. As soon as I would brief potential chefs about our requirements for fish, meat, no dairy products and which vegetables were out of bounds, they would invariably respond that what we wanted to create was



impossible. This didn't dissuade me; the answer couldn't be "no," only "how."

After a while of searching my brother identified a Belgian chef who had experience in kosher fine dining, with an amazing reputation. We met with him and knew instantly that he was the one. He became our head chef in Asado, and for 6 months we arranged for him to fly over each week, and provided him with local lodging. During this time, we collaborated to devise the perfect menu, and I carefully studied his recipes and methodologies, and brought in a new chef to be trained by him. By doing, this we had now established a new and workable system for fine kosher dining from an expert; something that the local community had never seen before.

What other features about Asado were unique?

I am something of an expert when it comes to meat. I know pretty much every kind of cut available and it was clear to me that the quality of meat that Asado would require is just not available from local butchers; in fact, many of the butchers had never heard of the kind of cuts we would need.

We needed the right cuts from very

good quality meat to create the perfect taste. Working with our expert chefs, we researched what was required and had to look internationally for the fitting cut. Eventually, we sourced this from overseas via a Kedassia beef distributor, where we were able to procure good quality cuts from highest graded beef at sustainable prices. Until today, when the meat arrives in the United Kingdom, I handpick the cuts and do not rely on anyone else. Through my work with our expert chefs, I learnt how to "read" steaks by simply looking at the colour, percentage of fat, marbling, smell, size and arrangement of muscle vs fat. Unfortunately, I can't rely on others to do this for me; when I have done so in the past, our customers have complained. Even a good cut of meat requires the perfect trimming to balance the fat and meat. Too much fat and your teeth will sink into it like jelly, too much meat and it can be tough. Getting the right cut of meat is very important to producing the perfect dish. Sadly, at times – even with all my effort – the best stock available is not good enough for my regular customers, who have now adapted to appreciate only the best. Therefore, I always stress: always ask if there's a good cut of steak available, and at any reputable restaurant the staff will be able to give you an honest answer. A lot of effort goes into this, and most people have no idea when they consume it; they just know it tastes and feels great. That's the most important thing, that they take pleasure from the

Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal via AP

Charles Hill, on the housekeeping staff at Kaiser Permanente in San Rafael, Calif., is the first to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in Marin County, administered by registered nurse Itamar Bikszler, Wednesday, Dec. 16.



dining experience.

We also bought an ager, something that wasn't available previously in the kosher market at all. When meat ages, it gets tender – but only in the perfect mix of temperature, humidity, bacteria control and specialized salt, to ensure that the desired texture is created. This ager allows us to take the best cuts to even a higher level.

How much of your food is ready-made and how much do you create yourself?

Everything we provide is made in-house, literally everything, from bread to barbecue sauce. People are very surprised when they learn this, but when you taste the food you realise why we do it. Also, everything we provide is made to order. Even our fruits are cut on order. You can't compare the taste of freshly prepared food to food that was prepared and placed in the fridge hours earlier. We make everything from fresh, on the spot, which does mean that people wait for their food longer than at competitor restaurants that do not share our "Everything from Fresh" concept. Some people think we're crazy for doing this, but people with even a minimal culinary understanding get it. This creates freshness, taste and textures that just cannot be imitated.

When did Asado open and how was it received?

We opened in Oct. 2018, and on the majority of nights since then we've been fully booked, with most of our bookings being made before the day of the meal. The greatest shock to me was noticing that most of our customers were not coming from Stamford Hill. Instead, they were people who were professionals in career and experienced restaurant goers, some of whom were not Jewish or fully observant. They emphasize that we have a truly unique and authentic taste and even keep urging us to open branches closer to home for them.

I'm proud to say that the feedback has been fantastic and that our reviews reflect that. I am happy to be able to provide a restaurant experience for the community where I can be confident that people will leave delighted and satisfied, looking forward to when they will come back again for something fresh, tasty and authentic.

Although much of what we offer has been taken from specialist and authentic fine-dining cuisine, there is something that we have taken from the Jewish world: our portions are very large. This is something that shocks people; despite the high quality of the food, they are unable to finish their portions because they are so large. I want people to receive portions that are filling enough that they feel that they can eat as much as they can. This is true for starters, mains and desserts alike. For example, whereas a regular fine-dining restaurant might provide a steak portion of about 250 grams, we

Joel Martinez/The Monitor via AP
Participants wait in line as DHR Health administers its first batch of COVID-19 vaccines at the Edinburg Conference Center at Renaissance on Wednesday, Dec. 16, in Edinburg, Texas.



go for something more like 1 kg. Our famous in-house sorbet served fills a main course plate rather than the expected 1 scoop. The quality of our food is extraordinary, therefore it's not very cheap – but our portions are very fair and extremely generously sized; often leaving people wondering how they will ever finish them!

How did COVID-19 affect Asado?

Business was booming, and then lockdown hit. We closed, and just after Purim when I was affected perhaps worse than others by then: I lost my grandfather and uncle to COVID-19; both had been healthy, and died within a week. We continued to provide something of a take-away service but then something happened that made us completely change focus. A friend called, in a jolly voice as usual, but I felt something was not right; he told me that his wife was struck by COVID and he needed food for his family. Of course, we're a restaurant and able to deliver food, but I was surprised by what followed: "I'm not able to pay you right now but if you let me take it on credit, I'll pay you back when I can." My friend is known as a

Between Purim and Pesach we received requests of up to 1,000 meals a day which we dutifully distributed, free of charge.

wealthy individual but clearly had no available funds due to the pandemic. If it was true for him, we reasoned, then there must be many others who were facing dire financial situations.

My brother and I had a frank discussion. The community had been so good to us so far, and now they needed our help. We made a calculation of what we could do to help and initiated a food distribution service to those who needed it in the memory of our grandfather and uncle. We put out an advert and publicised that although we were open for take-away, anyone who genuinely couldn't afford a meal could send their details and we would deliver a free meal. Within one hour, 100 meals had been ordered. We laid out containers in the restaurant, dished out meals and started and with the help of friends and family, we distributed them around the area. Between Purim and Pesach we received requests of up to 1,000 meals a day which we dutifully distributed, free of charge. For that period of time, we became like a soup kitchen, with some larger families ordering around 12 meals. Although it cost us tens of thousands of pounds, there is no doubt in my mind that it was worth it. Aside from the *chessed* involved, it was a big *kiddush Hashem*, with newspapers featuring us widely. Kind individuals and businesses approached us wishing to sponsor an evening's supply, some in memory of their loved ones who passed to COVID during those few weeks. It was really very special.

Since the midst of the pandemic, in what way are

you open at the moment?

Although we cannot yet host again indoors, we have the unique benefit of having a garden in front of the restaurant where we are able to comfortably set out 40 chairs in a way that people do not feel that they are eating on the street. We've opened a marquee and are currently fully booked every night, in addition to our cross-London delivery service, which is very popular.

PRESTO

Just over a month ago you opened Presto, this time a milky pizzeria/café. What was your plan here?

We wanted to provide something for the local North London community. The Asado experience is something really special but it's not likely to be a regular option for very large families. Pizza, however, is a great option for a family whenever making supper is difficult. As we had already had an existing restaurant infrastructure from Asado, there would be a good levels of economies of scale that we could rely on to make this venture viable.

How is what Presto offers new?

Once again, I wanted to provide an experience for the community that has never existed before. We took an old ice-cream parlour, refurbished it and put in two floors, adding tasteful décor. We made a significant investment here because we wanted to create something truly beautiful. We chose the best interior design, fittings and furniture because I believe quality food can be appreciated only when served in a respectable setting from a representable facility.

Once again, we wanted to provide the most authentic food possible. This meant sourcing a top-of-the range, custom-made pizza oven, which is a scientifically

created machine that, among many of its benefits, mimics a stone wood-fire oven. We researched the best flour for pizza dough from Italy and receive a weekly delivery of the finest stone-milled flour from Naples. The challenge with this, however, was to create a dough that would retain its strong and authentic taste but that people could still make *mezonos* on when eating as a snack. We enlisted an expert pastry chef, explained to him what was needed for the dough to remain *mezonos* and he created around 100 different samples of dough from the flour until he identified the perfect dough that fit the requirements.

It's well known that the best tomatoes for pizza are San Marzano tomatoes, which grow at the base of the volcano at Mount Vesuvius. The volcanic soil produces a fantastic fruity tomato – they are more juicy and even have a different shape, and we knew these were what we needed. After Kedassia's due diligence we were able to get these approved.

Getting the right cheese was a challenge. We weren't going to use cheddar or gouda; we needed the real thing. But, at the time, there was no Kedassia



Brian van der Brug/Los Angeles Times via AP, Pool

An empty syringe on a table at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center after a care worker received the COVID-19 vaccine on Wednesday, Dec. 16 in Westwood, CA.

supervised mozzarella. Once again, Kedassia were incredibly helpful. They organized our own Kedassia approved production of mozzarella.

Finally, to ensure that this would really be the authentic pizza taste, we enlisted an Italian chef whose family have been baking pizza for generations.



How have the new Presto pizzas been received?

The response has been very positive and since we opened just before Pesach, we have been very busy. We even find ourselves being frequented by Italians in the area who have been tipped off that we provide the real thing. People really appreciate the new and wholesome taste; this is anything but an “imitation pizza.. They like the way that the cheese is not heavy, the tomato sauce is well balanced and the consistency of the dough is just correct. For many people, we’re actually educating them what a real pizza tastes like, as they have never had one before.

A couple of weeks ago I noticed that we had received a number of double orders on the system and thought that there may have been a system malfunction. After looking into it, however, I realised that this wasn’t an error at all. People were consistently ordering additional delivery portions shortly after their first arrived. After asking why, I was told that this wasn’t because the portions weren’t big enough. People love the new taste and tell us that it’s the best they’ve had.

Is there anything else unique about Presto?

We are the only pizza shop which is open from 7 a.m. until 11 p.m., and are available whenever people need to eat. We provide

a café breakfast and are the first kosher café to operate in Stamford Hill. In addition to our pizzas, we make a very good pasta, milk shakes, frozen yoghurts and quality authentic sourdough sandwiches.

Our breakfasts have become very popular. Starting at only £9, people can get an entire breakfast delivery including shakshuka, coffee, frozen yoghurt, salad, bread and cheese. We send out more than 50 of these per day. This is something that hasn’t been available until now.

What areas do Asado and Presto service?

Asado caters for all of London; we have people travelling in from all over and we deliver across the city, including room service to any hotel in and around London, with specialized heat-proof packaging and the option of real dishes and cutlery. Presto does local deliveries and, on occasion, will deliver to North West London.

What’s next?

COVID has slowed us down, but not stopped us. We’re probably one of very few who opened a new restaurant during lockdown. At the moment, we are concentrating on perfecting the administrative department of both facilities and then, G-d willing, we’ll be on for our next venture. ■