



MAN WITH A MISSION

For dashing celebrity maitre d' Fred Sirieix of Galvin at Windows, giving something back rates just as high on the menu as his favourite Spanish tapas

BY REYHAAN DAY

It is midday, and El Pirata is dark, like an Andalusian tabanco. Fred Sirieix and I are sitting in the Down Street neighbourhood tapas joint that is Fred's favourite restaurant. He knows the team intimately, chatting to waiters like old friends. We devour plates of pan con tomate and Iberico ham with a side of wild asparagus. It's all been chosen by Fred; an imposing, bearded, Gallic figure, who knows the menu by heart.

He has been eating here for 12 years. As the maitre d' at Michelin-starred Mayfair institution Galvin at Windows, he doesn't have far to come. "I eat out here more than anywhere else," he says between bites.

Fred has been in the business for more than 25 years, so he knows what makes a restaurant special. "What I like is that the menu doesn't change; the food is always done consistently well." He says that there are very few restaurants he trusts – but El Pirata is one of them. "It's like with people; how many people can you really trust in your life? It's the same for restaurants."

He says that there is one thing in particular that helps keep businesses like El Pirata going strong. "It's their values – what they stand for, what they believe in. They're always thinking of the customer first."

For anyone working in service, dealing with customers is the most integral aspect of your work – something that Fred subscribes to, and instils in his own team at Windows. "Service and hospitality is about the connection and bond that you create with people; it's about making people feel special. It's about giving generously and always giving first."

Having paid his dues and asserted his expertise in some of London's most influential restaurants, 44-year-old Fred has become a recognised TV figure, widely known as the presenter and love guru on Channel 4's hugely popular dating show *First Dates*.

Fred has run front of house at Galvin at Windows for 10 years; and thanks to the success of *First Dates*, he is now using his profile to put the spotlight on the service industry.

National Waiters Day, which returns in October, is his brainchild. The main event is a race in Hyde Park; last year's drew about 500 people from the industry. Fred says it's all about communicating the important job that front of house staff perform.

"National Waiters Day is about making sure people know it's an amazing industry with amazing opportunities." He thinks its reputation has suffered from a lack of knowledge. "There are preconceived ideas about it – people think it's just for stupid people



Fred's favourite restaurant El Pirata
OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Fred with Chris Galvin



or foreigners. They think it's badly paid, with long hours, and that it's not interesting. In fact, it's fascinating."

These initiatives couldn't have come at a better time; with London's "unbelievable" restaurant scene, there are now more opportunities for those entering the industry than ever before. But Fred insists that there is still a long way to go until service is given the respect it deserves. "It won't be for another 20 or 30 years

that we will be where I think we should be. We need to work on it together as an industry, but it takes time."

As well as National Waiters Day, Fred co-founded Galvin's Chance and The Right Course, platforms designed to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds receive education, training and employment within front of house.

Galvin's Chance, launched in 2008, targets young people from less fortunate backgrounds. "I've always had a good life. My parents gave me a good education and loved me unconditionally, so I'm very privileged. But these kids come from very different walks of life." His work with The Right Course teaches prisoners how to run and work in restaurants while in prison. "I'm getting older, and I think I can and I should give back, because I'm now in a position where I can."

According to Fred, his best work is closer to home. "My children are my greatest achievement." In a professional capacity, he says his tenure at Galvin at Windows is a point of pride. "To do 10 years in the same place, and still be an award-winning Michelin-starred restaurant that is loved by its customers – that's great, it's about that longevity. I don't like to come and go."

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