The Best Business Advice From Lara Boglione

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A view of the central courtyard and The Petersham

Quietly determined, in 2011 Lara Boglione took over as managing director of Petersham Nurseries. The eldest daughter in the Boglione family, after years travelling India forging relationships with local communities and producers Lara returned to London to run the family business. Her goal - to bring the Petersham magic to a new generation- by transporting what her mother had created in Richmond to central London. In May of 2018 Lara opened the two spectacular restaurants in the new Covent Garden site, adding to the deli and lifestyle shop teeming with marmalde-coloured pots, Murano glassware and Sicilian crockery, which opened last September.

1. How do you describe what you do and what Petersham is?

I think I always start at the point that Petersham is about a lifestyle and trying to live in a way that you can be indulgent or you can be frugal but you do everything in a way that has a minimum impact on the environment and its surroundings. To be in harmony with the positions that we're in and the people that we work with.

It's a lot about the sourcing of the product, and I talk about the restaurants being very seasonal. They are influenced by Italian cooking and food but they're not Italian restaurants. They're very English in the way that we source our products, our fish will come from the day boats in Cornwall, our scallops are all hand-dived from the British seas. All of our lamb, pork and eggs come from my brother's farm. It is plot to plate but working with lots of different suppliers.

It's good wholesome food but delivered in different ways. So La Goccia is very much home cooking, and the Petersham is elevated but it's still celebrating the simplicity and the beauty of the product and also the provenance of it. The same with the shop, it's all about provenance and sourcing and

being able to deliver the best quality.

We celebrate unusual things as well, we want our customers to trust in us that if we do put something in front of them it will be the best quality of whatever that is. It's the same with the flowers, the flowers are as much as possible British sourced, without chemicals, beautiful garden roses and things like that.

2. Why are you opening this more central space now?

I was working in Richmond, which was a business that was created by my parents, and I could really see that there was a huge potential for our brand in the way that our customers and the people who came there and engaged with it, not only for the location and the space that it is, but also for the underlying principles and ethos that founded it.

The Petersham

3. And what are those founding principles?

I think we're a multifaceted brand that does create an entire lifestyle, so it's really an experience when you come there, and you visit it. For the past 15 years we've been using sustainably sourced produce, we've been using organic foods where possible, we've been in touch with our farmers and our suppliers. We recycle, we use all recyclable materials, we try and eradicate plastics, and then at the same time, we do this in a kind of way that people can appreciate it. So it's good, it's not just like a random type of food - it's delicious, it's good quality.

I think it's something that people really engaged with, and it's a lifestyle choice so when people come to Petersham Nurseries in Richmond they're kind of buying into the complete lifestyle. So people love it, and they enjoy it and come back and back again. For me, it was really about trying to harness all of that DNA and the founding principles of Petersham Nurseries in Richmond and make it a commercially viable business inside of central London.

4. Tell me about how you source things here? It has such a unique aesthetic.

This whole project has taken about four years from its first point of inception to today. It was a real journey harnessing all of that DNA and trying to re-map that into another location. In terms of putting it all together the concept has very much stayed the same. I was really lucky because when I started looking for a space, I actually got involved in conversations with Capco, who are our landlords, before this space even existed and managed to look at how we could combine four leases

to make one overall space, which has the central floral courtyard as its hub in the middle.

So when I was developing the concept, I was very much developing it for this space in terms of having a more fine dining restaurant, which would basically be taking what we do in Richmond, but making it less rustic just because of the nature of coming into central London. And then a very, very relaxed restaurant, which we've never had before, including the bar and everything - so that's a bit more contemporary - a bit of a younger take on what we already do in Richmond where you have dinner and a fun place to go out in the evenings. It's sharing and a really accessible price point. And then the shop was very much the idea from the get-go and hasn't really gone off course.

A view of La Goccia

5. I imagine sourcing the items is a really meticulous process...

The items, and what we're sitting on, the tables, everything has been a pooling together of all the artisans and people who we know or have worked with or come into our lives over the journey of this project. We've engaged with various different people, so the lady who paints the walls is called Marina, and she's a friend of my husband's aunt from Italy. She does this beautiful paintwork that has movement and it feels like a work of art but very, very subtle.

The tables that we're sitting on were done by an artist called John who lives in Jaipur, so we designed all of these always thinking about the garden, the earth, nature, the flowers that we're surrounded by in Richmond. So, it was about really bringing nature and earthy colours inside into the central London setting.

Most of these things have been worked on by more than one artisan, so here you've got the leather on the seats which comes from England but it's dyed in India with hand-dyes so there's no synthetic colours. The base of the chairs was done by John in Jaipur. Everything's been made to our specific measurements and designs, working with the artists. The mirrors on the wall are by a French artist who came here, and she collects antique mirrors, and she sat for hours in here with all her mirrors and all her prints that she puts under the mirrors.

I think you can feel the love that's been put into all the different pieces of furniture and all the fixtures and fittings - nothing's an off-the-shelf product. Our bar was done by Osana Visconti from Milan, and they literally leaves dipped in bronze - there's nowhere you would get that exactly the same. I think we've really put a huge amount of attention to detail and it's really been a fantastic process.

The bespoke bar at La Goccia

6. Tell me about developing your own voice and your aesthetic.

Well I think my own voice is very similar to that of my mothers. I love neutral, earthy colours - colours that aren't jarring. Even though we're in the middle of London, it's got to sit well against nature. So, we've brought plants in, we've brought trees and flowers in. I think the use of stones, metals, products that aren't synthetic. So, even though La Goccia is very contemporary, it's got a polished concrete floor, but it's also very earthy. There's a lot of wood in there, metal iron, the colours are always greens and browns. I think it's just developed naturally.

7. Talk to me about the competition.

I think that Petersham is offering an experience when you come here, and I think that people want to engage in this kind of lifestyle more now than what they did before. We've been at the forefront of it for 15 years. We've been doing the same things, practising what we preach. We haven't been making a song and dance of it, it's a natural thing to us that people are now engaging with more and more. So, it seemed like the right time to make it a viable business to offer something different to people, we do lots of talks and workshops. We do flower arranging workshops, pasta making workshops. So, there are a lot of experiential elements, which people are looking for more and more.

8. What was the space before this?

This was an old block of offices. Red-brick, not very attractive, so they pulled it down. And all of this is listed buildings, our shop was actually the original Moss Bros unit, which is funny. They had everything covered up, so all the walls were covered in fake walls and fake ceilings. We uncovered them to discover three Victorian light wells, at the time we were thinking about signing the lease, and we said okay it's a done deal. We've essentially got a mini-conservatory feeling in the centre of London. You're looking out at those beautiful old buildings, but you've still got a contemporary new exciting feeling in here.

9. Talk to me about designing the menu and differentiating yourself from other

So even though this is a completely new project, we're not a new brand, and these are not new concepts we are bring to the table. We've had this under our belts for 15 years. In that sense I think we've got quite a lot of authority on the subject matter, and we just try to be as transparent as possible. So when creating this menu it's about delicious and mouth-watering dishes that you wouldn't be able to just whip up at home.

Petersham is also the beauty of what's on the plate and it looking attractive as well, so we use a lot of fresh greens and flowers. I think we're unique in the way we put stuff together. It's not contrived food, it's not been messed with but it's the care that's been put into preparing it. It's not fussy.

Then next door [at La Goccia] it's all very seasonal and things will change - the odd dishes will change. The other day we ran out of fresh crab for the crab linguine but the Datterini tomatoes had just come in. So, Alex in the kitchen made linguine with the Datterini tomatoes, and they were to die for.

We have our hero vegetables in there, so at the moment it's broad beans and peas - a broad bean salad with pecorino cheese with just a little bit of olive oil and bit of salt. And you can go and buy it all in the deli as well so there's that connection.

It's very real, honest but delicious, beautifully presented food.

10. Any insights into how you've achieved such success in a notoriously challenging industry?

We love to nurture creativity as well so it's all about our teams having a voice and people who form our teams bringing things to the table as well. It's just like a big creative mixing pot. It's a big family of people and everybody brings something to the table.

11. As an impressive female entrepreneur, do you have any advice?

There's loads of things, I've learnt so much. If I did it all again, I would make changes. Funnily enough, the vision has stayed pretty much on track. I think it would be more from an operational point of view, so my biggest thing is the accounting. If I was doing everything again I would set up a foolproof accounting system because that really forms the backbone of everything from day one to today. And it's not that we didn't, we did have systems in place, but that would be my piece of advice.

I think if you can get that in place, no matter how big the project you're doing, then you've always got a very good tab on everything that's going on. Also surround yourself with a fantastic team of people who are better at what they're doing than you. I have some amazing people in this business operation, and I wouldn't have been able to do it without them. No way.

12. Do you embrace the title of entrepreneur?

Yes, I'm really happy to embrace it. I'm proud of this project, I'm proud of having seen in through from just a tiny thought to a complete reality in the four years. The ups and downs that have gone with it, the huge amount of stress but a huge amount of accomplishments as well. That feeling of being on a rollercoaster - you get a massive high because you achieve something that's been a huge struggle. And you get to the top and then bam something else gets thrown in your face. It's kind of a wonderful experience, and I've enjoyed every step of it.

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