



The chain from
Spain

Just five years after its first opening, La Tasca is about to launch its eighth tapas bar. **Neil Bromage** reports on the growth of this northern-based business



La Tasca force: managing director Neil Gatt and operations director Mary McLaughlin

THERE are those who would say tapas is old hat, but Mary McLaughlin, operations director at seven-strong La Tasca, is not one of them. "Tapas is still growing, both here and in the USA, and other ethnic food groups are starting to come up with tapas-style offerings."

La Tasca is still relatively unknown, even though it is the country's largest chain of tapas bars, but with plans to open more branches throughout the country that should change.

It's just five years since La Tasca opened its doors in Manchester's Deansgate. Since then little of managing director Neil Gatt's original concept has been altered, apart from a few early menu changes, and he has quietly opened seven outlets across the country.

Funding of £7m from 3i and Bank of Scotland, put together with the help of Arthur Anderson, will probably bring about a further six. The company's eighth restaurant is expected to open this month in Nottingham, followed by others around the country.

Turnover this year is predicted to be £9m-£10m – up on last year's £6m. La Tasca serves about 12,000 covers each week from six outlets – the seventh recently opened in Leeds. But then tapas was always likely to be successful. The idea of a simple, exotic mouthful, sufficient to stave off hunger but not damage the pocket, appeals to a mass market. As a result, tapas bars have sprung up all over but few have built on their early success in the same way as this northern-based operation.

Pricing is key. The menu at La Tasca is wide-ranging, offering almost 30 freshly prepared tapas. These start at just £1.95 for deep-fried potatoes in a spicy sauce and lead up to £3.75 for grilled tiger prawns or a selection of cured hams and sausages. For the more hearty there's a selection of paellas. The results in an average spend of about £12 per head. With wine available by the glass, diners can eat as cheaply as they want.

McLaughlin puts La Tasca's success down to a combination of factors. "What we're doing is targeting a niche market in specific main cities and towns where we have a flexible offering and informal setting. All the restaurants are fully licensed so you can come in and eat or drink, have a coffee or just a glass of wine. Our bars are also authentic, from the ambience and decor right through to the staff we employ, who are mostly Spanish."

It's not always easy to recreate a Mediterranean feel in the middle of gloomy Britain, but looking around the Bolton La Tasca, it's clear that a lot of thought has been given to design. Terracotta-coloured walls, tiled floors, plenty of wood and wrought iron chandeliers, coupled with the occasional flamenco in the background, are all reminiscent of Spain.

This ambience, it seems, has broad appeal. Office workers and shoppers dominate lunchtime business, followed by early evening drinkers, and then couples and parties later in the evening.

And this type of themed eating experience is something McLaughlin knows a lot about. She worked at Harrods, in the food and beverage operation, before moving on to join the launch team at Euro Disney. She joined La Tasca just over a year ago after a spell with Greenalls, looking after its themed bars. McLaughlin is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the multi-million-pound

La Tasca

Number of outlets: seven

(Chester, Liverpool, Bolton, Manchester, Didsbury, Newcastle, Leeds)

Staff: 300

Covers per week (in six outlets): 12,000

Average spend: £12 per head

Average seating: 180

Turnover 1998: £6m

Predicted turnover for 1999: £9m-£10m



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB WHITROW

La Tasca business, reporting directly to Gatt. "My role here is very much hands-on and I'm not at all office-based," she says.

In particular, McLaughlin's remit is to look for ways of moving the business forward, whether in sales, marketing or service. "We've got a winning formula and we're sticking with it, but there's always room for improvement," she says. "When I joined we had only three sites and I was able to spend a huge amount of time in each one. As we grow we have to do other things to ensure we are consistent throughout the company."

She achieves this consistency through a variety of strategies, from putting customer feedback cards on all the tables to sending in mystery shoppers. "When I was at Greenalls we used a company called ABa in Manchester to assess all our outlets, and I knew its methods were different from other companies. They use small teams of assessors who understand service issues and can empathise with staff.

"They have helped us to develop this as a training tool rather than a stick to beat people over the head with. It works really well and now managers and staff look forward to their next visits, even though they never know when they'll happen."

Customer service is paramount. With more and more lunches eaten on the hoof, La Tasca also offers a 10-minute challenge – if your food isn't on the table within 10 minutes you don't pay for it.

The company employs 300 staff and McLaughlin acknowledges the difficulties expansion brings. "It's like any small company: the bigger it gets the more challenges you face. What we're trying to do is retain that small company mentality and feel, and the synergies that make a small company successful. As more people come on board one of our biggest tasks is keeping that small, family culture."

But after a clear, planned programme of expansion, which McLaughlin sees taking about 18 months to complete, what beckons for this 36-year-old? "I love what I'm doing and I'm enthusiastic to take La Tasca to the next level. The next year is very important and I'm keen to see at least a dozen outlets open. What happens then will be determined by what the company does." ■