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SHAKEN NOT STIRRED

Olive Catering's Damon Brown on
taking the Contract Caterer prize at
the *Cost Sector Catering Awards*

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Three cheers FOR OLIVE

Olive Catering won the Contract Caterer category at this year's *Cost Sector Catering Awards*, and Damon Brown believes the foundations for success were laid at the beginning by him and his two co-founders. **David Foad** reports.

Three is the magic number according to Damon Brown, and it wove its spell on Olive Catering in 2004 when he, Sally-Ann Bradley and Andrew Norrie got together to start their own contract catering company.

Brown and Bradley had worked together for Catering Alliance when it was sold to Aramark. They quickly decided to start up on their own, but felt their backgrounds as chefs, and working in operations and sales, meant a missing ingredient remained.

That final piece of the puzzle was found when they were introduced to accountant Norrie, who had worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers, and he agreed to join them as co-owners.

Olive Catering in brief

Founded:	2004
Head office:	Warwickshire
Staff:	750
Clients/contracts:	115
Turnover:	£23.5 million
Website:	www.olive-catering.com

"We were a bit different at the start," Brown recalls. "A lot of other people had tried this set up, with an operator and a seller, but we had the three of us, including Andrew, who's an accountant.

"His influence meant that, from the start, we lived off our savings. The result was that for the first couple

of years, we didn't earn a penny – and even since, we have only paid ourselves from the profit of the company, and we retain a minimum of 25% of profit generated each year to reinvest in the company.

"It was absolutely the right thing to do. Andrew has kept us on the straight



COVER STORY - OLIVE CATERING



and narrow from the start. Sally-Anne and I had learned from our previous experience that this group-of-three approach works.”

In the past six months, Olive’s performance has been vindication of this belief, with the company announcing impressive growth and trading figures. In 2015, its 11th year of operations, it won £3.6 million of new business, taking its annual turnover past the £23.0-million mark.

Alongside this, it achieved an industry-high client-retention rate of 98%, was named one of the ‘1,000 Companies to Inspire Britain’ earlier this year by the London Stock Exchange and then, in March, won big at the *Cost Sector Catering Awards*, taking home the Contract Caterer Award, while the company’s Food Innovation Team was also named a runner-up in the Team of the Year category.

“I was very proud that night – it was brilliant. To win was fantastic, and you can see what it meant to me from the big cheesy grin I’ve got in the photo,” Brown chuckles.

He is quick to point out, however, that there’s also a business benefit to be had from doing well in industry awards events. ►





“The *Cost Sector Catering Award* has already helped us win a contract, just a few days after the ceremony.

“I was talking to a potential client and said we’d won an award, and he said ‘Okay’. When I told him the award said we were the best contract caterer in the country, it really got his interest, and now we’ve got the deal.”

All of these accomplishments are a far cry from the early days, but serve to illustrate just how quickly the company has grown and developed in the 12 years since its founding.

Brown says that, from the start, the aim was to make sure top-quality food was at the heart of the business.

“After eight years with Catering Alliance, we’d learned a lot, so we took the good things from that experience. One thing they were very good at was people – looking after staff and clients.

“We got that and understood it, but we felt it was even more important to be good at food. That was our USP [unique selling point]. We came up with it 12 years ago, and it has stayed with us since then.”

Like many others who have started a contract catering company, they found that getting the first contract was more important than any impressive corporate commitment to good-quality food.

“When Sally-Ann and I parted company with Catering Alliance, there was a nine-month restriction clause to prevent us going into business. We desperately needed a job to sell off the

The spirit of Olive

What sort of company is Olive Catering? Co-founder Damon Brown is in no doubt: “We want to be the workplace caterer of choice. We are a specialist B&I company now. We pulled out of the further education market four years ago because we just couldn’t see a lot of growth in it.

“It was a difficult choice because it was worth £4 million in turnover for us, but we weren’t making any money out of it.

“With the benefit of hindsight, it was definitely the right decision to make; it has made us better at what we do.”

“Olive puts the focus on quality food. Good food that customers want and enjoy is the end result – that’s what we are working towards. Everything else is a means of delivering it,” Brown continues.

“Our staff are hugely important to us, and we believe in supporting them, training them and looking after them, but good food is always the aim.

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence that everyone in Olive at a senior level, bar Andrew [Norrie, co-founder], is a chef.”

And growth for Olive will always be a steady affair because Brown doesn’t believe in winning a contract for its own sake.

“When you go for an appointment, you have to ask ‘Is it a contract where you can do a great job?’ If it’s not, walk away. I have been to lots of appointments where we come away and think, ‘It’s not for us’.

“There are clients who have to save money and those who want to do what’s right for their business. People are working harder than ever for their clients, and a staff restaurant is an important benefit.

“There are clients out there for everyone. We have always been selective; we don’t go for everything. It’s a difficult market out there right now, but there are still opportunities.”

“I like to see the arrangement as a partnership with the client,” he explains. “When we first go and see a potential new client, I want to hear them to say they want a good catering service as a benefit for their employees.

“The manager of a Japanese pharmaceutical company came to us last year – he only had 60 people on site and he asked us about doing staff feeding.

“We talked and he said he wanted it to be the hub of the building. As far as I was concerned, he had the right attitude, so we went in, set up a team of two in a lovely little space by the main stairwell, and now there is 100% uptake every day.”

That’s the past and present of the company, but what does Brown think of future for Olive?

“We sit down every year and do a rolling three-year plan. We turned over £22.8 million last year, and we’re tracking on plan to do £25.0 million this year and £27.5 million the year after.

“We’re all in our mid-40s and still full of energy. We’re not going to sell. It’s not worth selling because there’s not enough value in the business for us to retire on.

“But in any case, I love the job – the industry has got so many great characters in it, and it keeps us all interested. Why walk away from that?”

back of, and we finally met a man who took us on at Eaton Corp in October 2004. They were our very first client, and we still do their catering. In fact, we did a special ten-year lunch for

them a short while back, providing a free meal for every employee as our way of saying thanks.

“We also picked up [mobile phone dealer and now the online division of

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Damon Brown (seated) with Olive's Food Innovation Team.

Carphone Warehouse] e2save, which was a design-and-build company started by a pair of entrepreneurs.

"They recognised in us a similar spirit and said they would go with us. They didn't look at anybody else, and we still do their catering as well. That was a flagship deal for Olive."

Brown says that although Olive began a period of rapid growth once it had pocketed a couple of showpiece clients, it remained a very Midlands-focused company for the first three years.

"We decided we would never be more than an hour from the business – we didn't want guys driving all over the country," he explains.

The decision to evolve from that initial concept to a national company wasn't something that was ever planned; rather, it happened organically when Olive secured the contract to provide staff catering at SSL International's research site at Cambridge Science Park.

"The client's head office was in Manchester and, after we got the Cambridge contract, they asked us to do the Manchester office as well.

"At first, we fretted about setting up an office to service this contract, but then we realised we actually didn't need one: the accounts function could still be



centrally located, so we opted instead to recruit a local operations manager for the job and built the business in the north around them. That has since grown very successfully."

The expansion happened three years ago and marked the point at which Olive became a truly national player in the contract catering market.

"The south has more business," says Brown, "but there's also more competition from other very good caterers such as Bartlett Mitchell, Charlton House and others.

"For us, it was like setting the business up again from scratch. Our

first success was Japanese Tobacco International's head office in Weybridge, which, when we finally got it, was a real flagship business gain.

"It was a hard win because the incumbents were doing a good job. It took a year to win it, but we demonstrated that we could deliver what we promised.

"I wanted to show them the best example of what we did and finally persuaded them to visit our Capital One site in Nottingham. I said to them, 'Come and see this because it's better than what you've got', and that helped persuade them." ■