



INTERVIEW with... Jason & Chris Black



BII CEO Steven Alton (left) with Jason and Chris Black, and Damian Saunders, Managing Director of Sky Business

JASON AND CHRIS BLACK MBII ARE THE WINNERS OF THE BII LICENSEE OF THE YEAR AWARD 2021. BII NEWS' EDITOR KATE OPPENHEIM CBII SPOKE TO CHRIS ABOUT THEIR ACHIEVEMENT AND GOALS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

Q What does it mean to you both to be crowned winners of the BII's Licensee of the Year Award 2021?

Winning has been a massive achievement for us, bearing in mind that we have only been licensees of our own business for three years.

Receiving recognition from industry experts, especially during this time when the sector has been so hard hit, made it all the more intense. It has been a rollercoaster of emotions getting through to the finals, with each stage of the competition giving us an opportunity to reflect upon our business and everything that we have achieved.



monotony and boredom of cooking at home every day.

Everything we achieved during lockdown has helped us build a better business moving forward. For instance, when we first reopened our garden for trade in April 2021, we had the single biggest sales day on record.

Doing what we did gave people a reason to want to come back and we made them all very welcome.

We also opened our shop, which focuses on selling local produce to our community. It's a farm-shop style offer, that has a strong environmentally sound ethos, for instance, we sell milk in glass, returnable bottles, that people bring back for refilling. We also stock our frozen ready meals and it has been so successful that it has become a permanent fixture, utilising an area of the pub that wasn't particularly well used before.

With three sites in Cornwall with St Austell - the Pityme Inn, Rock; the Luggar Inn, Polruan; and the Weavers Inn, Bodmin - we also launched our new app, called Cornish Inns. This

allows our guests to collect reward points, order click-and-collect takeaways and access exclusive deals, as well as our 'pay at the table' facility,

and get information on upcoming events. Ultimately it gives them access to everything they need to know about our pubs and encourages repeat visits. We see it as a great way to future proof our business and is another initiative we'd like to share with our fellow BII members.

Q How are you ensuring your business is sustainable, not only for now, but for the next two to three years?

We have invested a lot in new systems over the last six months, to give us better control over our GPs and stock, and to get all of the elements of the business interlinked. In terms of environmental sustainability, we are looking to grow more of our own produce, like herbs, to avoid having to buy in pre-packed goods in plastic, and we invested in an electric vehicle to deliver our takeaways. Reducing waste and food miles is key, which means we keep our menu seasonal and try to use local suppliers.

Q What pearls of wisdom and inspiration would you like to share with our members?

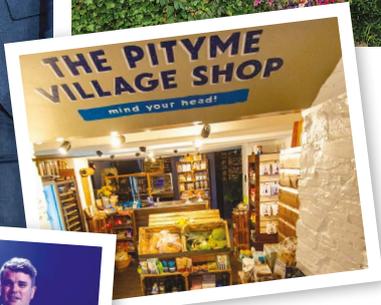
It would be to always think about your business in terms of having a long-term strategy. We view our business as a career for us and our team. We try not to take on seasonal staff, but employ a full-time team throughout the year, as we believe seasonal staff are less engaged with the business. We look to promote and develop our people through the business from team member to assistant manager and onto general manager, and we move people around the three pubs too, to give

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Q What are the standout successes of your business over this last year?

Our ethos is always to keep going. When the pandemic hit, we started to do meals-on-wheels and with a team of volunteers, we delivered up to 200 meals twice a week to the vulnerable, disabled and old people living locally. It was important to us that we kept the supply chain going, as we recognised that our suppliers were really struggling.

We started offering takeaways too, fish and chips on a Friday and roasts on Sunday, as we saw it was important to give our customers a break from the



other venues can be an eye opener. We get out every week and encourage our staff to use other venues too – we pay for them to go to and drink/eat elsewhere, and when they come back, we ask them to tell us about it – what they liked or what they would change.

All this means we have a high level of staff retention, with 10 of our team members having relocated from M&B in London to Cornwall.

Q As the winners of LOYA, you will have the ear of the industry, its governing bodies and even the Government. What will be the key messages you'd like to get across?

It's that hospitality needs to be seen as a career. We all need to make hospitality even more relevant to new candidates and better promote everything this industry has to offer.

Also, sustainability – both financial and environmental.

Everyone should be growing their business year-on-year, while also looking to be more sustainable: being greener is a selling point.

Q Finally, it wouldn't be the 'Oscars' of the licensed trade without giving you the opportunity to thank those who have had the greatest impact on your success...

Fundamentally our teams have got us through the tricky times. We couldn't have done any of this without them. Also, St Austell has been hugely supportive and the BII has been really helpful, both in terms of advice about growing our business and also career development for our teams. ■

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As winners of the Licensee of the Year Award, Jason and Chris Black MBII will receive a year's free pubs and clubs subscription to Sky Sports, £500 towards a party in their pub to celebrate with their staff and a model of their pub created by artist Bunty May Marshall to commemorate their win.



you need to own it. If you're getting four out of five, it's about working to achieve five out of five.

Q What do pubs and the wider

hospitality sector mean to you?

Both Jason and I have grown up in and around pubs, Jason was a General Manager with Mitchells & Butlers for eight years and I have a degree in business and food, and I worked for a food importer doing product development across Europe, developing ranges for the major supermarkets. We believe that our experiences give us a wider and very balanced view of the industry.

We are absolutely committed to what we do. We see hospitality, especially pubs, as vitally important to all our communities, and this has never been more true that over these past couple of years.

Creating a viable and community focused business is what we are passionate about, and taking part in this awards process has helped us view the bigger picture and see things with fresher eyes too.

We, as a sector, need to make pubs more viable and work to create outlets that are seen as being vital in providing community support and valuable, long-term careers.

Hospitality workers should feel proud to go to work every day. As an industry, we need to cultivate and grow the next generation of licensees: we need fresh, new blood to create even better venues for future generations.

Getting out of your business to visit

them the broadest experience possible.

While we are in a heavily touristy area, we work hard not to alienate our locals during the peak seasons. In winter, we diversify more and hold a Christmas market, along with themed nights, live music, etc, to create a meeting and social space for our locals. It's not just about the food and drink.

These days, it's very easy for people to drift from one pub to another restaurant, and so on, but we place huge value on developing and growing our brand for the long-term. We keep our brand relevant and engaging all year, making it as easy as possible for people to want to return to us.

Our branding has been created to have a broad appeal – it is as applicable to the high end, second home owners, as to the camp site visitors on a tight budget, and it is for the locals too. We also do a lot on social media.

We have also started using a software system called *Feed It Back*, which provides a dashboard of all social media engagements. It identifies any recurring issues and also makes it easy to gather the positive messages. You are given an overall score at the end of each week too, which provides a good guide to what you're doing well and what's going wrong.

Facing up to any problems is important, because if things are wrong,