

Turning his back on a promising career as an opera singer, Julian Saipe joined his wife's fledgling events catering business and decided to take on London's establishment. *Piers Ford* found out how

A passion for parties

Client lists in the party catering market uncover some odd bedfellows, but anyone who can successfully service the disparate demands of Vanessa Redgrave, the Conservative Party, Jonathan Ross and Merrill Lynch must be a serious contender in this fiercely competitive arena. Take a bow, Zafferano, the Islington-based high-end caterer that is emerging as one of the leading purveyors of memorable culinary events on London's corporate and private party scenes.

"Everybody loves Champagne," says managing director Julian Saipe, as if that single denominator explains the trebling of Zafferano's turnover to £1m between 2003 and 2007. But this is a tough market to crack, and the company's growth has depended upon a combination of word-of-mouth recommendation, web marketing, and Saipe's determination to penetrate the closed shop of London's leading event venues.

Saipe, 39, used to be a professional opera singer but turned his back on a promising career as a bass-baritone when he realised that he was more interested in the organisational side of opera production. He created Big Voice Productions in

1998 with the aim of producing opera for corporate events. A self-confessed purist, he never wanted just to book "tea-party baritones" to serenade guests at corporate dinners and christenings. "I wanted people to listen to fabulous Verdi, sung by proper Verdi voices rather than three good-looking guys with a backing track," he says.

But Saipe found that corporate clients didn't really trust their guests to appreciate the difference between a £4,000 quartet of professional voices and a £500 group of student singers. Bookings were elusive and Saipe realised that his idea had commercial limitations. Fortunately, he'd recently met his future wife.

Food writer and chef Vivienne Gonley had started Zafferano as a sole trader in her north London kitchen in 1992, inspired by her love of Italian food - she had spent time in Bologna, working as a tour manager for gastronomic holiday specialist The Alternative Travel Group - and rapidly gained a reputation for the flamboyant quality of her catering among the Hampstead celebrity set.

The couple were married in 2000 and for the next three years Saipe continued to divide his time between performance



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and his slow-moving events business, while Vivienne wrestled with the multi-layered demands of a thriving catering company that were taking her further away from the kitchen.

"Viv's passion - which is basically about food as a gift - was becoming trying," Saipe says. "There was so much more to the business. She needed a managing director, and I realised that while I had a passion for business, making one out of opera wasn't the obvious solution. So we decided to start working together. She would continue to write menus, liaise with clients and plan parties, and I would get my teeth into the structure and direction of the business and knock it into shape."

Zafferano Catering Ltd was incorporated in 2003. Last year it made a pre-tax profit of £130,000. Today, the company caters for more than 150 events a year and has six full-time employees, with a further 30 regular part-timers - chefs, bar managers, waiting staff and kitchen porters - on the payroll. When more staff are required, Zafferano uses specialist agencies, such as Off to Work, that understand the demands at the high end of the market and have dynamic, enthusiastic people on their books who are, according to Saipe, "interested in the events industry, have initiative and smile a lot, which looks good at events".

Party catering at this level is, he says, a venue-driven business. Corporate clients choose the venue before they book the caterer. So forging venue relationships was Saipe's biggest challenge during his early days as managing director.

"We had a loyal private clientele, but I realised I had to build Zafferano's reputation so that we would become preferred suppliers at the key London venues," he says. "At first, it seemed like a closed shop. I'd ring up the Wallace Collection and naively ask to be added to their list. They'd ask: 'Who the hell are you?' Over time, I learned that it was a mutual process. You'd be expected to

THE CLIENTS

Zafferano's clients span the corporate, charity and celebrity world and include:

- Merrill Lynch (Christmas dinner for the global marketing department - 60 guests - at the Foundling Museum).
- Hg Capital (fifth anniversary dinner dance for 400 guests at

the Royal Hospital Chelsea).

- Imperial War Museum (Camouflage Exhibition launch party for 400).
- ING Real Estate (Champagne and canapé summer reception for 300 at the Orangery, Kensington Palace).

Celebrity clients include David

Walliams, David Baddiel, Harry Hill and Jonathan Ross.

Private clients can be ambitious: Robert and Debbie Taussig commissioned Mini Glyndebourne - a fully costumed performance of *Così fan Tutte*, followed by dinner and dancing for 150 guests.

◀ bring in clients and new business. But how do you manage that if you aren't on the list to begin with?

"It was a vicious circle that we struggled with and it was very hard for the first couple of years. Some of our competitors have been on venue lists for 15 years and enjoy the fruits of referrals from the venues themselves. We had to make an impact by taking business to the venues."

Online marketing – a revised website and pay-per-click advertising – was the key.

"We started getting some really big gigs because people were seeing this funky website, coming in for a tasting, loving the food and giving us the business," Saipe says. "It was a big turning point for us. Two summers ago, a garden designer called us just because she'd seen our listing on Google and clicked through to the website. She eventually booked us for a £60,000 party for her client. I thought it was incredible."

"Google is only the means to an end: it's rare that someone will book you just because they've seen you on the web. But online marketing really helped us to build a corporate clientele in our own right and that wins venues over. If you say that you've just catered for the birthday party of a senior partner at Merrill Lynch who wants to hold the departmental Christmas dinner at their venue but will only use you, they'll say, 'yes, come and have a shout'. Recently, we got on to the list at Somerset House and that's truly A grade, very exciting. There's a real sense of arriving with that appointment," Saipe says.

Zafferano sets a minimum budget of £2,000 for its clients. The average spend is around £7,500 for a cocktail and canapé reception, rising to £20,000 for a dinner for up to 300 people; although if Zafferano is also organising the lighting and floristry, that could rise to £70,000.

Clients will sometimes want to negotiate down: surely six waiting staff would be enough? Won't two turbo ovens do instead of four? Saipe always

resists if corner-cutting affects the quality of the event.

He says it's up to the caterer to realise the client's vision and that's where the extra mile comes in: sourcing Dom Pérignon 1996 when only 1998 is available (Zafferano had to buy it from a private collector and sell it on to the client); finding Royal Beluga caviar at an affordable price; with the help of an event management company, setting up the Australian Pink Floyd show in a client's back garden for a 250-guest party (the generator went in the front garden); or providing canapés for 300 from a minuscule kitchen at the 100 Club in Oxford Street (the back bar became a worktable for the chefs).

Saipe says: "Corporate clients tend to hold events at venues where there are limitations on what you can do. But I love the amazing backdrops and that's the theatrical side. I always say that once the guests arrive, our work is done. The curtain goes up and it's over to the managers, the chefs and the staff."

"We don't have huge expansion plans," he says. "We've never borrowed money. This is a business that has, from day one, evolved organically, based on our reputation, client loyalty, and great venue relationships."

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THE FOOD

Zafferano food is prepared at the company's production kitchen in Islington and finished by the chefs at the venue. Costs range from £20 per head for canapés, to about £40 per head for dinner.

The most popular canapés this season reflect founder and chef-director Vivienne Gonley's passion for bringing international accents to a base of Mediterranean cuisine: chilled summer red and

yellow tomato gazpacho; and buckwheat blinis with London smoked salmon, sour cream & Avruga caviar. A typical dinner menu for the summer will reflect the availability of fresh ingredients:

chargrilled Cornish red mullet fillet with panzanella salad and tapenade; roasted loin of salt marsh lamb, salad of Cromer crab, roasted fillet of home-salted cod; and desserts include a chocolate tasting plate.



Costs start at £20 a head for canapés, which often have a Mediterranean base, such as these aubergine bundles