



Capital VALUES

Levin has launched some of Britain's famous chefs, invented the gastropub, created London's first boutique hotel. Erik is caught up with him at The Capital hotel

DAVID LEVIN is 73, but you wouldn't know it. After an hour listening to his carefully-crafted anecdotes, delivered ever so softly in an appealing Scottish brogue, I forget his age altogether and ask him what his ambition is.

He laughs, and then says: "I am horrified to tell you that I have two very serious projects on the horizon."

When he says "serious", he means it. David Levin may be entertaining, but he is also a serious player. This is the man who was serving local and seasonal produce when competitors were warming up frozen food; the man who claims to have invented the gastropub; the man who helped chefs Brian Turner, Richard Shepherd, Gary Rhodes and now Eric Chavot to stardom; the man who launched, ran and sold the famous Greenhouse restaurant in Mayfair; and the man

who created what *Square Meal* has called "London's first boutique hotel", The Capital, handily placed between Harrods and Harvey Nicks, and – since 2003 – featuring a restaurant with two Michelin stars.

And it all started, he tells me, with a black eye.

"I remember the first day I went [to work] with my Glasgow Academy blazer on, I got a black eye. That was my start in the industry," he says.

"Because you were a grammar school boy, and needed taking down a peg or two?" I ask.

"Yes. But it was fine. I was not deterred."

He chuckles as he recalls wearing the jacket his father was married in and shirts with paper fronts, smiles again as he remembers trading lobsters for beer on Scotland's west coast and grins widely at the memory of the duck sandwiches he used to serve at his gastropub near Pangbourne.

David began his career 57 years ago as a commis

waiter at the Malmaison Restaurant in Glasgow's Central Hotel. Twelve years of hard graft in British Transport Hotels led to his promotion as manager of the Lochalsh Hotel in Kyle, overlooking the Isle of Skye, in 1964.

"We had a French chef and I said, we're going to do local food," he says. "It was unheard of. What you did was you bought frozen food and canned potatoes. Canned! Tinned potatoes! Does anyone know about tinned potatoes anymore?"

"So, what was local? Lobsters. I used to meet the boats coming from Barra with lobsters and we used to sort them out. They were just out of the water and they were paid for in beer – export lagers..."

"So, we did grilled lobster and lobster mayonnaise and lobster cocktails, and so on. And we did local lamb."

The restaurant in the Lochalsh Hotel became so



Top left: one of the deluxe rooms at the Capital. Below: the Capital's two-star dining room. Bottom: reception room at The Capital.



apprenticeship there, and took over the Greenhouse when David opened it in 1977. These days the restaurant at The Capital is run by Eric Chavot, the two-Michelin starred chef highly rated by his peers.

The Capital Group includes the 1930s-styled Levin Hotel, next door to The Capital, with just 12 bedrooms and Le Metro Bar and Brasserie.

Irrepressible, David also owns The London Bakery, which supplies many of London's top hotels and restaurants, and a Loire-valley winery entertainingly called Le Vin.

The bar of The Capital is comfortable and intimate, much more like somebody's living room than a bar in a hotel. David draws my attention to the photographs on the wall. They're by Fred Zinnemann, the Austrian-American director of the films *From Here to Eternity* and *A Man for all Seasons*. They're stunning, historic images in black and white mounted in solid silver frames. One of David's little touches.

And the truth is that I become so involved in a mental calculation of value (tens of thousands) that I forget to ask what David's two mystery projects are. I guess we'll find out soon enough.



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David Levin

popular that David's boss travelled up from London to tell him to tone things down a bit because he'd make his successor look bad. So, he quit. And at 27 he borrowed £14,000 and bought a pub, The Royal Oak at Yattendon in Berkshire.

"I was so arrogant," he grins, "I was confident that I could make a success of anywhere... And I suppose unknowingly I started gastropubs. I put a coffee machine in the bar. We started to do sandwiches and soused herrings, which we did ourselves. Egg mayonnaise from the local farm, everything was local. And we did duck sandwiches."

One of David's regular customers in those days was Leslie Marler, chairman of one of the UK's best-known property development companies, Capital and Counties – CapCo to its friends.

Leslie asked David to come and work for the group, building hotels. David declined, but he did become a consultant and he was actively involved in the design of the Lowndes Hotel in Belgravia and the Howard on the embankment at Temple.

At around that time, CapCo owned much of the south side of Brompton Road and was keen to get a Marks & Spencer store into one of the retail units there. M&S pointed out the difficulties with servicing the store from the rear, so CapCo knocked down a block of flats in Basil Street.

"And I said, that's a perfect site for a hotel," David says. "They said it's far too small. I said, it's perfect. They said it's a back street, nobody will come. I said, perfect, it's an absolutely perfect site. They knocked the flats down and put the site out to tender as a hotel, on my say so, and I tendered by far the highest rent – £42,000 a year."

David won the bid and opened The Capital hotel in 1971 – with 50 bedrooms and with the restaurant he was told again and again would never work running a charcoal grill and serving its own ice cream, for which it had to be licensed.

Richard Shepherd – now owner of the Langans