

# Tour de Force

Benugo founders Ben and Hugo Warner have recently competed in a section of the Tour de France, the notorious tough Mont Ventoux stage. They're no strangers to uphill climbing. They've been doing it since 1988, when they opened the first of their premium sandwich bars, setting new benchmarks for the trade. Nellie Nichols went to see them the new Serpentine Bar and Kitchen in Hyde Park



I've never particularly liked cycling. Perhaps it was my interaction with a No 14 bus the week before I got married years ago when cycling up the Fulham Road that put me off, or on the other hand, something to do with lycra. I've never liked lycra. Man made fibres have never done it for me; they are far too shiny and just seem to generate sweat.

It's not that I don't admire cyclists. Their ability to get up ridiculously steep hills with all that sheer determination etched on their faces is admirable, although in my mind the whole thing is still utterly pointless. Then there are the actual bikes themselves. No matter the modernity of the carbon fibre design and ultimate aerodynamic efficiency, none of it impresses me as I stand before two shining examples of such technology outside the new Serpentine Bar and Kitchen in Hyde Park, the latest opening of the two Warner brothers, Ben and Hugo.

These bikes are far from a passing fancy to keep fit by riding to work for these two fitness fanatics. Despite running a hugely successful chain of five high street shops, four cafes within museums, three restaurants, and fifteen stores within corporate buildings belonging to some of the most respected companies in the world, they still had time to train for one of the toughest sections of this year's Tour de France: the Mont Ventoux stage.

Both completed this gruelling ride of 180 km, the last 28km of which is uphill to the very top of the mountain. Of the 9,500 entrants 3,000 didn't finish at all. Passing grown men in tears, whom through exhaustion had given up along these final

bends, being helped into ambulances and helicopters, Ben achieved a finishing position of 1,000th place, beating his brother in 7.5hrs by just a few minutes.

Ben and Hugo work very closely together. For the last eleven years they have created the most impressive of high calibre food businesses, more than worthy of the recent Specialist Sandwich Chain Award they recently received at this year's Sammies.

Sitting with them on the vast outside terrace beside the Serpentine lake in Hyde Park drinking coffee, I'm asking the questions (one being: Me: 'What are all these horrific green insects?' Ben: 'Don't be ridiculous, what do you expect, we are outside) to piece this success story together, but it's proving very difficult indeed.

They are both constantly noticing things they have asked to be changed that for some reason still haven't been. Why a bin is here rather than there, why a table hasn't been cleared quickly enough, why the lavatory cleaner who doesn't actually work for them still hasn't been fired.

Frantically interrupting each other, the banter is endless and the subject changes between them as quick as lightning. One sentence about bins morphs into last week's record sales; not even I am sure how and I was listening.

They fit together like peas in a pod with a natural synergy and complete understanding of each other. It would make far more sense if they were twins. I'm trying to understand who is responsible for what but it just isn't that clearly cut. You could say Hugo is more Operations led, yet they are both the key contributors of the



creative style and make up of the brand. And certainly for me this is the unique thread of success that runs consistently through everything they do.

Opening their first store in 1998, in the years that have followed they have elasticised their brand, creating a true diversity, moving on from the high street deli and the stores within the City financial institutions of Lehman Brothers and Deutsche Bank, all the way to the now enormous public spaces they cater for such as the BFI, and the Victoria & Albert and Natural History Museums. Each and every site has a different template, fitting into its immediate surroundings, whilst at the same time maintaining the signature touches that are unmistakably Benugo.

Their presence within the V & A Museum demonstrates without doubt one of the most impressive and sympathetic cafés I have ever come across, located in the Museum's original refreshment rooms - the Morris, Gamble and Poynter Rooms - situated beside the Museum's central garden.

These three rooms formed the first museum restaurant in the world and were intended as a showpiece of modern design, craftsmanship and manufacturing. To sip a Benugo latte while sitting in a room designed and built by William Morris in 1876 as his first commission, surrounded by his inspiration taken from the Middle Ages, executed in the most vibrant of greens is, I believe, the true meaning of the word awesome.

But that is not all. It would be remarkably easy to underpin these important illustrations of history with the full tackiness of takeaway, but the sympathetic and subtle execution of several counters in the main hall outside them, almost camouflaged in neutral colours, blends in and avoids offending even the most critical of artistic eyes.

Each counter offers one simple choice: modern and glassed, one of daily changing grills with salads heaped high in bowls, the identity of each scrawled in white along the glass, another a hot food counter of roasts and pies in beautiful white pie dishes. Earthenware jugs of hot homemade gravy and wooden trugs of Kilner jars of sauces. Yet another of hand made wraps lined up like fat overfed soldiers, salad on the side. Here is the Benugo brand of food that shouts about being made with love, care and opulence.

I can barely drag myself away, I could sit in the Gambling Room all day gazing at the enamelling and ceramic tiles, or even better - the original oven in the Poynter Room, but I'm intrigued to see how different their newly opened modern café in the Red Zone of the Natural History Museum could possibly look so I am trotting round the corner like a true tourist, enveloped amongst the moving snake of Japanese families, swinging the very latest technology the digital world has to offer from their necks. They are far more patient than me in the queuing stakes (I constantly fidget

## PROFILE: BENUGO'S



in queues, have done since a child) and I feel a bit of fraud as my visit can hardly be described as educationally enlightening. I'm just hopping round Museum land from one latte to another.

Benugo at the Natural History Museum has been open one week when I get there and already it has the unmistakably strong smell of success about it. You can argue the captive audience argument, (well the whole place was knee deep in families on summer holiday day trips), but everyone I can see is looking like they are enjoying themselves, and therefore I'm assuming the whole service and food package must be delivering.

What's impressing me here? Only the clean crisp lines of black chairs and white tables and the long comfy red banquette, cleverly leading your eye straight to the shop at the end of it; the simple Kilner jars, again making an appearance, this time stuffed with cutlery; the clever separate children's fridge filled with simple sandwiches and drinks; the fabulous counter area brimming with army style Billy can tins, overflowing with vibrant salads and giant tarts and, again, the Sergeant Major wraps. Benugo's food first feeds the eye, then quickly the stomach.

Back at the Serpentine I want to know the secret of this success in developing on from what is still one of the first modern Deli sandwich counters, to something that does sophistication and simplicity hand in hand, which then ripples through their business on a wave of outstanding style. Everyone's welcome here from joggers and skateboarders to dog walkers and girls who

lunch. There's a dark, cosy and quiet seating area in the middle of the restaurant and then lightness and glass surrounds. Ask for one of their rugs if you're feeling chilly sitting in one of their deckchairs outside. Check out the big olive tins used as ice buckets and flower vases. The lampshades, chairs and plates don't match and it all has immense charm, the plates coming from Burleigh, the last remaining Victorian pottery in Staffordshire.

The answer may take time as Ben and Hugo are back interrupting each other all over again. I'm sort of saved by Ben having to start his alfresco Board Meeting (well you may as well enjoy them). Then Hugo starts to describe it as best he can: the importance of availability, variety, presentation, smartness, cleanliness, truly good food.

I am reminded of some of the things they make from scratch so well: their homemade Piccalilli, wonderful sausage rolls, kaleidoscope salads, the prospect of their new range of Italian style ice creams with an English twist; Eton Mess, Jam Roly Poly and Bakewell tart flavours. Then they're seriously thinking of putting Lobster and Chips on the menu. Then he succinctly kicks it all into touch in a single sentence; they are just trying to improve everyone's enjoyment of life.

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The above is based on her independent views



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