

Smart's *gold medal hospitality*

The ingredients behind the successful catering at the Olympic Hospitality Centre included 132 chefs and more than 900 menu items. Terence Baker reports



Smart Hospitality's chief executive Greg Lawson and Michelin-starred chef Angela Hartnett made a formidable Olympic team

The London 2012 Games - the biggest show in the world - knew it needed a podium-worthy hospitality, food and beverage offering. There was no lack of fit and willing companies eager to throw their hats into the Olympic ring. Perhaps the smallest competitor, Smart Hospitality (SH), decided to go against the big boys, including Compass, Do & Co and Sodexo, and came out the winner following months of negotiations, a very nervous wait and an 857-page tender document. The prize: the catering contract for the Olympic Hospitality Centre (OHC), which comprised the International Olympic Committee Club, East Albion Club for tier-two and tier-three VIPs, and 11 sponsor hospitality suites for companies such as BMW, Omega, Visa and Panasonic.

Greg Lawson, Smart's chief executive, says: "We are known for catering, but we knew that to get this contract, we needed a great selling point. That's when we decided to go to Angela."

'Angela' is Angela Hartnett, MBE and Michelin-starred chef, who has cooked up a storm at such renowned culinary spots as Sandy Lane, The Connaught and, now, Murano, having learnt her trade under the stern watch of Gordon Ramsay. She says: "It was a daunting prospect, but it was also a once in a lifetime opportunity. Smart has done the big numbers before, and I know how to put a menu together, so we did go into this with our eyes open."

Lawson soon realised the task ahead: "We had only a year to plan before the Games began. Organising involved about a dozen different tastings of 485 dishes, all of which Angela attended, having a pool of approximately 2,000 staff from which we selected 947, devising a five-day buffet menu cycle that could be adapted but not radically changed, and fulfilling the Games organiser LOCOG's stipulations. As soon as we won the contract, the emails flooded in, with 40 coming in the hour immediately afterwards - people we had worked with who knew we were bidding and wanted to work with us, not for anyone else. We got 90 per cent of the staff that we wanted."

"We put all staff through Best Companies'



interactive employee course The Art of Engagement to make sure we had the best of the best," he continues. Thus, the plan and the staff were in place. Now, the execution. Hartnett says she did not think about the huge numbers involved: "We had to break it down into the individual suites, some of which were packed all day and night, others just in the evening. There were some teething problems in the first days, when you saw which clients were more demanding."

She might not want to think about the numbers, but they make impressive reading: 60,000 covers over 17 days; 132 chefs (14 coming from Michelin-starred UK restaurants), more than 900 individual menu items across three separate levels of hospitality and an average of 3,000 guests per day at both pre and post-event sessions.

Other headaches Lawson solved concerned security: "Every single food item had to be processed through a cross-docking facility (thoroughly checked by MI5 and headed by an ex-military man) that was 12 miles away. Due to security, we could only bring things into the Olympic Park between midnight and 4am, so we needed to have 48 hours' worth of food on site at all times. There were health and safety people everywhere!"

The suites also took on different characteristics, Lawson notes: "Coca-Cola wanted a funky image, while British Airways had older, very smart ex-pilots and stewards as hosts. The food for each mirrored those differences."

Nerves were most on edge as the opening ceremony loomed. Hartnett admits: "At 3pm, I was screaming 'No!', but after our first wave of guests and on seeing the fireworks at midnight, that changed to a 'Yes!' The first few days were the most difficult, although it was not so much about anticipating problems, but solving them. I personally sent food through to the suites when I was happy with it, so I knew there was nothing amiss. Preparation is key, especially if you are told that 300 people are returning from the stadium."

Both agree that working with LOCOG was a great deal easier than initially thought. It did, however, insist on an all-British menu, with

ingredients coming no farther than 80 to 90 miles from Stratford, the London district where the Games were held. Menu items, Hartnett explains, included: "roasts, curries, Chinese and Thai dishes, lobster salad, Scottish salmon and potted shrimp." The food was transferred from massive refrigerators in the main kitchen to mini-kitchens in each of the suites and then - after chef and staff made sure the quality and presentation were maintained - to hungry guests, which on one day included Microsoft's Bill Gates casually chatting with Oracle's Larry Ellison.

"Right from the start," Lawson adds,

evolving from her relationship with Lawson and the Whitechapel Galley, her first restaurant after she left Ramsay's stable, is now an integral part of Smart Hospitality's offerings.

Both immediately got to work on a wrap-up party for OHC staff, which culminated in awards of framed bowler hats (representing the OHC's London Bar, which displayed numerous examples of the iconic head gear) being handed out by rugby legend Martin Johnson at Smart's main London venue, Battersea Evolution. A second party for LOCOG was held at the Copper Box.

Much has been said of the Olympic legacy.

'It's important not to lose momentum, so we're bidding on Sochi in 2014 and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics'

"LOCOG wanted a partner, not a supplier, which made it an amazing experience. Working with Jan Matthews, LOCOG's head of catering, cleaning and waste, was a joy, and I soon had the same respect for her as I did for Angela."

As to the flow of VIP and sponsor guests, Lawson adds: "LOCOG knew who had tickets and to what, so we could judge the flow. Actually, the opening ceremony was easy, as guests came in, then saw the show and then came back again - other times it was very much 'light the blue touch paper and run' time."

There were some things that went easier than expected - transportation, motivating the staff. Other things were harder - dealing with the heat and the sheer number of miles to be walked. But overall, the end result was an immense pride in a huge job done extremely well (and a few blisters).

So, what now? Hartnett has no intention of becoming a huge outside caterer, although Smart by Angela, a range of specially designed menus

And that of Smart Hospitality and Hartnett? "We're a far better catering company now," Lawson says. "We have a broader bank of suppliers from across the UK, whose passion for what they do and produce really did make our job so much easier, and we have learnt so much. It's important not to lose momentum, so we're bidding on Sochi (the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia) and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics have knocked on our door. We're also in talks with two major British sporting stadiums."

The OHC's venue general manager, Charleen Cannone, was delighted with all she saw and took the time to write to Lawson, Hartnett and their team: "Boy, did we achieve something incredible! Having seen two previous OHCs in real life and countless pictures and stories of others, I can, hand on heart, confirm that we've delivered the best OHC ever. Congratulations. As a team, with the benefit of being a very British company, you should be so proud of what you all achieved."