

Philippe Castaing



“Something new is needed, something bold and brave to stimulate change.”

Philippe believes that the Brixton business community needs a new image. Not one imposed from outside but one created and believed in by the existing community. “Something new is needed, something bold and brave to stimulate change.”

Name:
Philippe Castaing

Philippe came from La Rochelle in France to London aged 18, and 15 years later has become an integral part of the Brixton community.

Position/occupation:
Brixton Green,
Founder and owner
of Opus Café and
Upstairs Bar and
Restaurant.

Working in the high end catering business initially, Philippe catered for events as diverse as Elton John’s birthday party and London museum launches. Bringing a specialist model ice cream maker to the UK heralded the start of Philippe’s catering consultancy which even took him to joining Gordon Ramsey on the set of the first series of Hell’s Kitchen.

Brixton is already home to a number of creative and socially responsible businesses and is already a local, national and international brand. “I wanted to capitalise on this brand and my vision is to make Brixton a green business hub, the ‘silicon valley for green enterprise.’” By attracting green and socially responsible business, Philippe is confident that Brixton can benefit socially from the influx in investment and job opportunities, the profits helping to support local projects.

Residence:
Brixton.

In 2001 Philippe rescued a derelict chemist on Acre Lane in Brixton and opened Opus Café. Renovation of the upstairs part of the building in 2005, created the Upstairs Bar and Restaurant to complement the café below.

Philippe’s passionate vision for Brixton doesn’t stop there. From Philippe’s belief that green industry is the new industrial revolution, during the summer of 2006 Brixton Green was born.

Sustainability experience

As a businessman in Brixton, Philippe was invited by the Vice Chair of Brixton Business Forum to act as a representative for the Acre Lane community. Painfully aware of the poor business performance of Brixton, Philippe took it upon himself to try and address its underlying causes, and just as importantly, what can be done to improve performance.

The concept of Brixton Green was presented to Lambeth Council Executive and in the autumn of 2006 became a sub-Committee of the Brixton Business Forum. This status provides a quick and direct link with the borough but Philippe believes Brixton Green should be a community led business initiative, and as such wants real community ownership of the concept, not just background support.

Philippe believes the reasons for Brixton’s poor business performance are multifaceted. “The relocation of Lambeth Council to Vauxhall is certainly one reason for the decline in business in Brixton, and the ongoing stigma attached to Brixton persists in detracting successful businesses. This is despite the fact that Brixton is one of the few areas in London that has actually experienced a significant decline in crime levels, and the majority of crimes still committed are by people from outside the Brixton community.”

With the vision of Brixton leading the new green business revolution and a message of “come and do business here, and make money in a socially and environmental sustainable way”, Philippe has been on the campaign trail, generating interest from across the community and getting members on board.

Initially for Philippe the main priority for Brixton Green was to focus on sustainable deliverables and to truly understand what becoming a green, sustainable hub entails. However, with the level of community interest Philippe has already

engendered, he wants to take a broader view of a sustainable community and has even greater aspirations for Brixton Green.

“A sustainable community for me means more than just green business, but access to services, skills, and a safe environment with opportunities for jobs and personal development without having to leave Brixton. Environmental business is a great place to start. With the right business ethos, good practice is passed to employees who adopt a similar ethic in their own lives.”

The timing is good. Lambeth has commissioned consultants Arup to produce a masterplan for Brixton to assess existing infrastructure and gaps and opportunities for community development. It is anticipated that the masterplan will be finished by October 2007 and will be open for public consultation until January 2008. Philippe hopes that Brixton Green has the potential to be a facilitator between the borough and developers, and act as a problem solver, ensuring that subsequent development is of a high environmental standard and that it promotes sustainable communities at its core.

Philippe's work doesn't stop at developing and driving the concept of Brixton Green. As the owner of a sustainably aware restaurant business, Philippe became involved with the work of the Greener Food Campaign coordinated by London Sustainability Exchange. The Greener Food Campaign aims to help small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) from across London's food and drink sector to embed more sustainable business practices. For Philippe the message is simple, “Saving energy, reducing waste, and conserving water is not just good for the environment, it saves you money and as a small business this is a number one priority.” The Greener Food Campaign carried out an environmental audit on Opus Café and the Upstairs restaurant and now Philippe is on the Green Food Committee, helping to drive the Campaign forward and continually raising awareness of sustainability to other businesses.

The sustainability challenge

“I would like to see a London with no private car ownership but expanded car clubs using efficient car models. I've already given up my car as a symbol of my commitment to sustainable development and I have 3 children to ferry around! However, for this to become a reality we need exciting and integrated public transport – better access, better training for bus drivers, and fast and efficient networks. I think this means trams and better high-speed trains, with the River Thames utilised for transport and leisure. I believe London will continue to be a transport hub but domestic air travel is unacceptable and trains in this country will have to improve in order to prevent this.

“Sense of community is at the centre of all my work really. I believe London in 2050 will be more centred on creative local communities, where people live and work in the same place.

“Climate change is a huge and potentially overwhelming concept for people to get to grips with. Broken down though, smaller steps like micro generation, biomass, waste free processes, are manageable and very important. I believe the city needs to operate in a circular and not linear pattern to be self-sufficient though this is more than a question of resources; it's about restoring community cohesion and a safe and equal quality of life. Only then can we aspire to be a sustainable community.”

London Leaders

“Serving the community is central to me as a person. The Brixton community has given me business success and now I want to give back to this community, help it flourish, so there is a future for my children and the children of everyone in Brixton.”