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Labs**

'It's about a lot more than just money in the till': how lockdown has shifted priorities for Southsea's purveyor of pies and records

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The VISA logo is displayed in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and closely spaced, with a slight shadow effect behind the text.

Spurred on by his local community and his passion for music, Steve Courtnell is determined to open his doors once again

Malcolm Jack



In challenging times, we all crave simple comforts: things like good company, good food and good music. All reasons to head to Southsea's Pie & Vinyl for some well-deserved self-love once lockdown fully lifts then - this is the cafe-cum-record shop and community hub that puts the rave in gravy and the thrash in mash.

"It was conceived in my head while I was working an office job," says Pie & Vinyl founder and owner Steve Courtnell of the inspiration behind his unusual business, which he thought up while working in management and inventory in the fab world of consumer luxury and beauty. "My big love is music and always has been. So, like a lot of people, I kind of had this dream, which was to run a record shop." His dream came true in April 2012 when Pie & Vinyl opened its doors for the first time.

In the digital downloading and streaming age, such a vision could have proven half-baked. But Courtnell put faith in the vinyl revival, which over the last decade has seen sales of vinyl records - often with free download codes enclosed - recover to their highest level in years. It helped that Courtnell, a Southsea native, had a clear idea of the type of record shop he wanted to run - an open-minded and welcoming focal point of the local alternative scene. It was to be a place to meet and hang out with like-minded souls and even attend in-store gigs. "Whatever kind of music you're into, I wanted it to be somewhere you could feel at ease," he says.

As for the pie and mash? Courtnell simply had a desire to put a contemporary

spin - pun intended - on a traditional working class dish. You might even call it a remix. "The great thing about pies is you can put almost anything in them," he says. "So we started doing pies dedicated to bands and albums and record labels, some of which have become really popular."

Favourites such as Back to Black, Steak That, Pearl Jam and Sonic Pieways have kept a steady stream of customers drifting through the door for eight years now. But given that it specialises in niche interests, Pie & Vinyl has always had to stay nimble. "We don't take anything for granted for one second," says Courtnell.



Record shops play a crucial role in the culture of any town or city. Photograph: Alun Callender/Guardian

But no amount of caution could have prepared him for what was coming in March this year, as Covid-19 suddenly hit Britain. "It felt like something from a film," says Courtnell of the gloomy day he heard that his dream business would have to close.

With his staff furloughed, leaving him to deal with online sales on his own while also looking after young twin boys at home, things might have got on top of him. "But I guess I'm quite an optimistic person," he says. He has used the time out from his usual routine to draw breath, plan for the future, and, quite apart from anything else, feel thankful for the music. "It has really allowed me to focus on the records," he says. "To be honest, the records are the thing that got us through this."

A tide of goodwill from the Southsea community that Pie & Vinyl serves has

helped to push online sales way beyond what it's used to seeing. "It's been really humbling to see a lot of old customers reconnect with us - these waves of people that wanted to buy records to support us," he says.

One day he came into the shop and found an envelope on the floor. "Someone had taken the time to make an anonymous card with a pie on the front - a photo of their dinner by the look of it," Courtnell laughs. "And they had put about £30 in cash inside from a whip-round, together with a message saying: 'Keep strong, can't wait to have you back, buy yourselves a drink or something.' It's a moment that really sticks in my head."



Courtnell and his staff are eagerly anticipating the day that the needle hits the groove at Pie & Vinyl again. Photograph: Alun Callender/Guardian

While he can't wait to open the doors of Pie & Vinyl again, the prospect of doing so during a recession, with social distancing rules to be rigorously obeyed, is daunting. Particularly as the food side of the business is likely to be restricted to takeaway-only for some time. But support from Visa's Shop Local campaign has been encouraging for Courtnell as an independent trader facing an uncertain future. "It feels nice knowing that a major company like this cares about the smaller businesses and understands that they are part of the foundations of a community," he says.

If the turmoil of the last few months has taught Courtnell anything, it's the

role that independent shops, and particularly something like a record shop, can play in the life of a place like Southsea. Their impact goes far beyond simply the wares that they sell. "If you're a record shop you're quite important to your city or your town's culture, and kind of a gatekeeper of that as well," he says.

"It's all about fun really - in dark times if you have a chance to make people smile or entertain them somehow, then I guess in your very small way that's how you step up and help. It feels like we'll be offering the community a service as much as anything when we open the doors," says Courtnell, eagerly anticipating the day that the needle hits the groove at Pie & Vinyl again.

"We're inviting people to come into this little haven and start enjoying music and seeing record covers and talking about music once more. It's given me another dimension of love and understanding of what we do, and made me appreciate that it's about a lot more than just getting money in the till. That's something to look forward to seeing in action, now more than ever."

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'The best part was seeing people, even from the doorstep': how a Scandi baker served its Harrogate regulars in lockdown

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Inspired by his Norwegian grandma's cooking, Paul Rawlinson opened his own bakery bringing a slice of the Nordics to Yorkshire. But forced to lock down just as he was about to expand, what does he think the future will hold?

Malcolm Jack



From *serinakaker* butter biscuits to cinnamon buns, Paul Rawlinson was raised on Scandinavian treats galore, without even realising that there was anything unusual about it. "We had a waffle iron, and that was very much a tradition on a Sunday afternoon," he recalls. "I never really wondered why other people didn't eat them."

Rawlinson, who grew up in Manchester, had his grandmother to thank for the Nordic influence in his upbringing - an influence that continues to have a big bearing on his life and work. Born in Stavanger in 1923, Liv Esther Baltzersen moved to England after meeting her future husband at the London Olympics in 1948, and lived the rest of her life there, mainly in the north-west. Yet she never lost touch with her roots and would celebrate her Norwegian heritage in all sorts of ways - not least through cooking and baking. "These Scandinavian things were just part of visits to grandma really," says Rawlinson. "There was always Norwegian family visiting, or Norwegian cakes and biscuits on the table."



Within a few days of lockdown starting, Rawlinson started selling and delivering goods direct to customers. Photograph: Matthew Lloyd/Guardian

After five years spent travelling the world as an army officer, Rawlinson decided to settle down in North Yorkshire with his wife – to start a family, and launch a business that he had dreamed about since childhood. In 2012, Baltzersen's opened in central Harrogate – a cafe where Yorkshire-sourced ingredients meet Scandinavian inspiration. Locals and tourists alike were soon hooked on the homemade smörgåsbord of delights that Rawlinson and his team had to offer. Be it open sandwiches with meatballs or pickled herring, *pølse* street food sausages, *lapskaus* meat and potato stew, or traditional heart-shaped Scandi waffles (prepared on irons imported from Trondheim). All that, and enough cinnamon buns to feed a battalion – Baltzersen's bakes and sells some 10,000 of the icing-swirled delights every year.

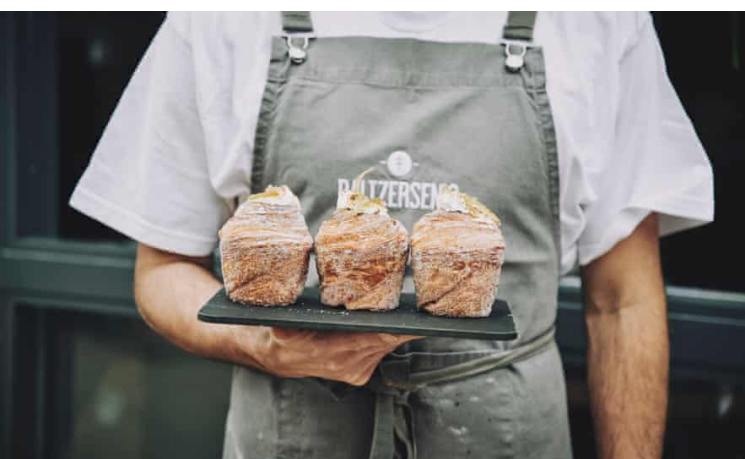
How did Rawlinson's time in the army, which saw him serve in Afghanistan among other places, prepare him for his new life serving food in a spa town near the Yorkshire Dales? Better than you might imagine, it turns out. "In many ways, they're fairly similar," Rawlinson says, of the military and the hospitality industry. "When you go to Sandhurst, you're training to be a leader and what I

do in my job now is lead people. I was an engineering officer, and I guess engineering is about designing processes and trying to make things as efficient as you can."

This training certainly came into its own when lockdown hit - how could they adapt? Rawlinson and some of his staff launched a major operation to keep the business running online. A small independent business such as Baltzersen's could well have feared for its future - especially as it had just put the finishing touches to a new off-site bakery, an expansion designed to allow it to bake its own bread among other things. But in adversity Rawlinson sensed opportunity for a new initiative.

Within a few days, Baltzersen's had pivoted to start a "click and collect" option as well delivering their rye breads, sultanaboller buns and "cruffin" pastries direct to customers. The online service quickly proved popular, and Rawlinson ran it with martial discipline, converting the cafe into a temporary "logistics base" to plan and coordinate drop-offs of up to 1,200 products a day to about 100 different homes.

"We got loads of nice feedback from people telling us it was the thing they looked forward to each week," says Rawlinson. "The best part for us was being able to still see the people that we normally would see two, three, four times a week in the cafe, even if it was just from the doorstep, giving us a wave. It was great being able to maintain that connection with our regular guests."



Rawlinson values the connections he has built with his customers, and has been pleased to see them, even if only from the doorstep. Photograph: Matthew Lloyd/Guardian

Good reason to hope that the people of Harrogate haven't forgotten about Baltzersen's while it has been closed - and that they'll start to return once lockdown lifts. "That's a big worry for us, like all independent businesses, after all the work we do to build and maintain relationships with customers,"

Rawlinson says. "To be locked down for so long has given people a lot of time to make new habits. Will they come back to us?" he asks.

Only time will tell. But he's encouraged to see Visa's shop local campaign getting behind the independent traders that are the beating heart of the high street. "A company such as Visa can shine a big light on small businesses like ours," says Rawlinson. "Hopefully when people read our story, it'll make them think about their equivalent of Baltzersen's on their high street, and think 'it's important for us to try to get back there reasonably quickly to support the businesses that we love'."

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'Will people queue to get in? I hope so': how one Scandi-inspired boutique is getting ready to reopen its doors

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VISA

Hoos, an independent homeware store in Glasgow found a lockdown lifesaver in online trading, but owner Karen Harvey is now ready to embrace a new era of face-to-face shopping

Malcolm Jack



Since opening in July 2016, a small Scandi-Scottish design boutique on Glasgow's Great Western Road has become a source of joy and inspiration for passersby, thanks to its stylish window displays of cool furnishings, homeware and fashion items, not to mention twinkling lights by night and lush green plants that spill on to the pavement by day. So to see Hoos closed and boarded up as lockdown began was tremendously dispiriting, not just for its owner Karen Harvey and her team, but for others too.

"I know my customers have found it depressing," says Harvey. "People who live in the West End who have been walking past on their daily walks find it sad because they enjoyed my window. We always had loads of lovely feedback."

It's with huge relief then – if some trepidation – that Harvey prepares to have the boards taken down as she gets ready to reopen, hopefully sometime in July, based on current Scottish government guidance. "I'm looking forward to putting in a nice new window display to welcome people back," she says. But in this new age of social distancing, will customers flock to the shop with the same enthusiasm as they once did?

Last time we spoke to Harvey in November as part of Visa's shop local campaign, Hoos was getting ready for Christmas – always an exciting time for a place that stocks gift items galore, and which prides itself on providing a personal touch in helping customers to pick just the right things.



Harvey has continued to order stock from independent makers

"The festive period ended up being the best we've ever had," says Harvey. Good enough to carry her with confidence through the typically leaner months of January and February. But then, come March, Hoos, like most shops, had to shut - duration unknown.

Harvey furloughed her staff, but decided to continue working herself, running the online side of the business. It proved a wise move and enabled her to catch a wave of goodwill among shoppers who wanted to support the indies they love. "Because Glasgow and the wider country have got behind us, our online sales have been up by more than 200%," she says. "Every day I've been going in and packing up orders, and bringing them back to my house where they're collected by UPS. My front hall has started to look like a small warehouse."

Helping to drive business has been Hoos's upbeat and intuitive use of social media, whether it's been platforming new products and spotlighting favourite brands on Instagram or sharing Spotify playlists of music that would have been playing in the shop. "It's been like running a virtual Hoos," Harvey laughs.

As someone who is passionate about fostering solidarity among independent traders, Harvey - who received an MBE for her work running charities for

young people in a previous chapter of her career - has been keen to support other businesses as best she can during lockdown.

"Throughout this time, I've continued to order with independent makers, which has been a real pleasure," she says. "That includes Love and Squalor, who had a shop on Great Western Road and now have a studio making clothes. I'm their only stockist in Glasgow, so that's been a lovely collaboration. I think I've re-ordered three times in the last three months."

Even with more online business to supplement trading, the physical reopening of Hoos will present daunting challenges for Harvey, as she resumes responsibility for paying her staff, yet without knowing what footfall will be like. As is the case for many small independents, only a handful of people will be able to browse in her compact store at any one time. "We've seen that people will queue for food and essential items or a coffee and a bit of cake," says Harvey, "but when it's pouring down with rain as it can in Glasgow, will people queue to get in to Hoos? I hope so."

Ongoing support from Visa's shop local campaign is one thing giving Harvey cause to feel positive in an uncertain time. "It gives us a platform that people know and respect," she says. "It gives us independents a level playing field with the big names and says we're all in it together."

The loyalty and cheer of regular Hoos customers gives her most reason to look to the future with optimism. "I'm confident that they'll help us get through this," she says. "If I'm in the shop packing up orders for online, people go past and they see me and knock on the door to say hi and ask how I'm doing."

Hoos will turn four this July, and Harvey is adamant they will celebrate in style, whether physically or online. "We'll have a discount on everything to thank everyone who shops with us," she says. "I can't wait to see them all again. Even if it's at two-metre's distance, we'll continue to give our customers a personal touch."

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