

## DIVERSITY

*The hospitality and event industries should celebrate the role they have played in embracing the broader world, says Dr Peter Vlachos, Principal Lecturer & International Link Tutor at University of Greenwich*



# PROUD TO BE INCLUSIVE

Long before 'diversity and inclusion' became buzzwords, hospitality provided opportunities for immigrants to the UK to share their cuisines and cultures, to operate and manage hotels, and make a positive impact on neighbourhoods, towns, cities and wider society. From the Chinatowns of Liverpool, Manchester and London to the annual national Kebab Awards (which I admire, even as a vegetarian), the industry has given opportunities for ethnic minority-led businesses to thrive.

For many people, a meal at a local restaurant or attending a cultural celebration is their first positive chance to learn about and engage with people and communities different from their own. Live events like Gay Pride, Notting Hill Carnival, Lunar New Year, Diwali and Eid have transformed from community gatherings to major urban festivals that attract millions of domestic and international tourists.

Equality and diversity can take many forms in our industries and representations in the public displays of food, dress and customs offer social legitimacy. The Black Eats Fest at the new Woolwich Works arts centre in south

east London is an excellent example of how events and hospitality can combine to provide powerful, positive and inclusive cultural experiences; this year's event's 4,000 tickets sold out.

However, representation is only one part of the framework. Equally important is ensuring that decision making is shared and that pathways exist to offer people from under-represented backgrounds fair opportunities in employment and business development. We must continue to encourage, support, progress and celebrate the diversity of our industry; tokenism is not enough, we must always strive for fairness and excellence.

I am intrigued how festivals like Pride have become 'mainstreamed' in cities like London, Toronto and Sydney. Twenty years ago, large-scale events like Pride, Chinese New Year, and Notting Hill Carnival were still making a point "we're here, notice and respect us". Nowadays, while that is still important, these are all-embracing events in the broader sense, outward looking and there for all to enjoy.

Of course, inclusion and diversity in the hospitality and event industries are not without challenges. Issues of authenticity and cultural appropriation

remain. For example, to what extent should gastronomic products and cultural expression be simplified and homogenised to make them more accessible to wider audiences?

It was not only The Police but also Bob Marley himself who reformulated reggae in order to reach a wider audience. We academics might debate whether these were correct artistic decisions at particular historical junctures but there is no denying that such artists opened up interest in global musical genres beyond previous west European confines.

The quintessential British 'pub' ('public house'), as distinct from exclusive, members-only and otherwise segregated establishments, remains a powerful reminder of the leading role that the hospitality industry has played in Britain in promoting social equality.

The pub and the queue are our two great equalisers: it doesn't matter what you look like, what you believe or how rich you are, you still need to wait your turn.

We still have a long way to go but in hospitality and events we should certainly be proud of the contribution we have made in celebrating diversity, inclusion and social understanding. 🍷