

Our new Hotelier of the Year began in the industry aged 13, has worked in Scotland's ugliest building and used to polish his boss's slip-on shoes. But Andrew McKenzie has spent the past 10 years of his life heading up the Vineyard at Stockcross, in Berkshire, and his work there, combined with experience at many of the UK's provincial hotels, makes him a worthy winner of our top award, says *James Aufenast*

# McKENZIE'S BREAKS

Andrew McKenzie is holding his mouth strangely, like he's attempting a version of Munch's *The Scream*. "It's only the one tooth that feels strange," says McKenzie. "I lost a tiny filling but the work became something much bigger. They were digging around for a while."

Mmm, lovely. We may be sitting in the dining room of the Vineyard at Stockcross, with its two Michelin stars, lake with flaming torches and cellar full of Napa Valley wines, but a visit to the dentist overwhelms most pleasures in life. "My main aim of the day is not to dribble," McKenzie adds, helpfully.

## LOOMING LARGE

Yet it seems hard to believe that McKenzie could be felled by physical pain of any kind. Resembling a smarter version of TV host Nick Hancock, he looms large in a pin-striped suit, broad-shouldered, and moves his hands around a lot when talking, taking up even more space. Fortunately, McKenzie is launching into a story about being named our Hotelier of the Year, sponsored by Louis Jadot, for 2008, so he seems to be forgetting his teeth for now.

"I was on the way to Leeds University to drop my daughter off for her first year there when I got the phone call. I had to keep my language in check and keep it secret, which was difficult in a confined space. So I quietly punched the air," says McKenzie. He's a Glasgow Rangers fan, but football-style celebrations were out of the question.

McKenzie also had to maintain a stony silence with his staff, his boss, and his wife, which was even harder. "I've been absolutely bursting to say something. When you think of the people who've won Hotelier of the Year before – well, I'm just so proud."

We're eating a tenderloin of venison with celeriac purée, celeriac fondant, choucroute, baby spinach, sloe gin jelly, pickled trompettes de mort and venison jus, fortunately for McKenzie's sore mouth. Earlier in the day head chef John Campbell had shown us pieces of the

## ANDREW MCKENZIE'S CV

- 1998-present** Managing director, the Vineyard at Stockcross
- 1990** General manager, Shire Hotels, Carlisle, Penrith and Bristol
- 1986** General manager, Thistle, Edinburgh and Dunfermline
- 1984** Food and beverage manager, InterContinental Edinburgh
- 1983** Food and beverage manager, De Vere, Bournemouth
- 1981** Assistant food and beverage manager, Prince of Wales hotel, Southport and Chester
- 1979** Trainee manager, Stakis Aviemore and Nottingham
- 1974** Hall porter, Royal Hotel Bridge of Allan

venison precooked in small plastic bags. "We preheat it, and then it's just a matter of warming the meat before we serve," says Campbell. McKenzie jokes: "This was what I had to deal with at the start of my career – boil in the bag."

Campbell is laughing – sort of. "I like having a bit of fun," McKenzie says by way of explanation for his teasing. "Over the years I've tried not exactly to rewrite the industry rules, but certainly to question them."

That sounds interesting; what do you mean by that? "Yes it does, doesn't it? I wish I knew..." McKenzie pauses. Is this another joke? For a minute it seems he can't think of anything – or he's having me on. But in fact he's gearing up to say something important.

## THE FIGURES

- **The Vineyard**  
Turnover £7m  
Profit about £800,000
- **Donnington Valley Hotel & Spa**  
Turnover £7m  
Profit about £1.7m
- **Donnington Valley Golf Club**  
Turnover £1m
- **The Vineyard Cellars**  
Turnover £600,000

"What I'm trying to get across is that an awful lot of hotels at this luxury level can be pretty scary places for people to walk into. I've been working in them all my life, and I get intimidated. Are we using the right spoon? Have we sat down in the proper way? It's not right for customers to be thinking like that."

## FORMAL SERVICE?

But surely you can't avoid it at two-Michelin-star level. A certain formality of service comes with the territory, doesn't it?

"No, I don't agree. In our industry we have created a style of food and service that we think is right, and we impose that upon people. I don't want waiters interrupting a table of four just to tell them every ingredient that makes up their plate, or lifting an elbow so that they can serve from the right side. I want human beings, not robots, working for me," he insists.

McKenzie has a similarly relaxed attitude to room rates. From a maximum of £700 per night at the Vineyard, people frequently pay about £300, and on Sundays it can go down as far as £100. "It was considered sacrilege when we first opened, but most people on our level flex now."

Agreed, this is an example of McKenzie being one step ahead of the market, keeping premium branding up while driving footfall. But is the recent lunch deal of £20 for two courses a step too far?

"No, not at all. Some other operators have said to me, 'Isn't this a bit cheap?' But if we say to people 'We're inexpensive, accessible and we'd love you to come and eat here,' is that such a terrible thing?"

It's clearly not offensive, no, but perhaps the bottom line now takes precedence over a long-term luxury image? "I'm nervous as to how things will pan out," McKenzie admits. "But we're just ahead of last year."

Fortunately, the Vineyard's owner, Sir Peter Michael, borrowed £15m for the doubling in size of its sister venue, Donnington Valley, before the banks put their current stop on ▶



◀ credit. He added the Holy Grail at any property, a spa, and that has brought occupancy levels up from 69% to 73%. More importantly, this increase in customer levels has come over 100 extra rooms, enabling the hotel to double turnover for this year. “Everyone wants to talk about the Vineyard, but Donnington is by no means the poor relation,” says McKenzie.

We’re walking up the country house-style staircase of the Vineyard to a narrow first floor. Where hunting prints or full-length portraits of former owners would normally line the wall, here there are framed newspaper reviews, an extensive array crammed into the space. It’s a demonstration of how the Vineyard divides opinion. There’s an unusually glowing review from Michael Winner, and one from the then-*Telegraph* reviewer Craig Brown. The famous AA Gill article that questioned fish and chips plus paper in a Michelin-starred restaurant is absent, however.

“Their job is to have people chuckling over their cornflakes, not to make me feel good about myself,” says McKenzie, although he admits he heard about Gill’s review while celebrating his wife’s 40th birthday in Paris, which made for a difficult few hours as he tried to control his temper.

### SHOWBIZ CENTRAL?

In fact, lots of people didn’t know what to make of the Vineyard when it first opened, with comments like “Beverly Hills in the Home Counties” and “showbiz central”. So McKenzie and Michael drew up a plan of action to deal with the perceived lack of gravitas. They scribbled down a series of must-wins: the AA Wine List of the Year, two Michelin stars, a Catey, five AA red stars, and the Grand Award from the *Wine Spectator*.

“It was a calculated marketing ploy,” says McKenzie. “We wanted to focus everything on the restaurant.” A 2,000-bin list, with a Californian bent, and Michael’s own Napa winery taking a slot, allowed PR on the drinks offering, too. “We rarely mentioned the hotel at first,” he adds, “even though, with 31 beds, we’re not exactly on the French provincial restaurant-with-rooms model.

“But, yes, we’ve really had to punch above our weight. Our competitors have more natural assets than us. If you drive past Cliveden, your jaw drops. Chewton Glen is in a lovely part of the world, and Le Manoir has its beautiful gardens. Off the M4 corridor isn’t the natural place for a luxury hotel and restaurant.”

It’s impressive honesty from McKenzie, yet, barring the *Wine Spectator* Grand Award, all these prizes have come the Vineyard’s way. If nothing else, it shows both McKenzie and owner Michael as having an ability to carry out a long-term plan, a rare quality in hospitality.

Is McKenzie an obsessive organiser? “Well, my career wasn’t laid out in any exact way,” he insists. “I’ve always sucked what I could out of any job, usually spending about two years in each position before using *Caterer* to find a job and move on.”

McKenzie’s path through the world of the UK provincial hotel shows ambition, however, as well as a sensible choice of job-searching material. His father was a builder and his mother a housewife, and aged 13 he was delivering groceries to locals in his home town of Stirling, along with newspapers and milk. But



## McKENZIE'S TOP 10 MANAGEMENT TIPS

- When something’s gone wrong it’s down to one of three things: either you haven’t communicated to staff properly; the training wasn’t up to scratch; or there’s a lack of discipline.
- Engage your customers. It’s far better to be over-familiar than too stand-offish. You can rein in people if necessary.
- Don’t compromise on quality. You might save some pennies in the short term, but you’ll lose more with a dull product.
- Run your business along broad guidelines, allowing each section manager to take responsibility for their work and staff.
- Create assets if you don’t have them, and market in a focused way. But beware of sounding too egotistical in your promotional literature.
- Balance profitability with luxury. Adding 18 rooms at the Vineyard made the break-even point arrive sooner.
- Aim for excellence rather than perfection. You don’t want to train all the personality out of your staff.
- Keep some things to yourself. Before you know it, the glasses have been changed after you made a small comment about the way the originals looked.
- Insist that your team don’t have to respond to criticism. I don’t want my staff feeling that they have to provide answers to my queries at every turn.
- Fit potential employees to the venue. Staff who aren’t suited to the Vineyard have flourished at Donnington Park.

McKenzie got speaking to a waitress at the Bridge of Allan hotel and found she was earning more than his three jobs combined. So he started working at the hotel during his school holidays.

Then he went to study physics at university, became bored and quit the course, and joined the Stakis group for regular 90-hour weeks in Aviemore. “It was wrong, really. They were crazy hours. But I won’t be the first person in hospitality to have worked lengthy spells, shall we say, and in fact at that age I lapped it up.”

His boss at the time was no help, however. Here was a man who would ring the porter’s bell, waiting for McKenzie to rush to the door, knock and enter. He’d be sitting with feet up on the desk, reading a newspaper and then kick off his slip-on shoes. While these were still hot McKenzie had to bend down and polish them.

But McKenzie had his big break when he was transferred to the company’s hotel in Nottingham. The waiters there wore purple jackets, while the managers had suits. McKenzie bought a black two-piece from a local tailor and just started turning up to work in it with a grey tie. One day there was a wedding at the hotel with no managers on duty. His general manager grabbed McKenzie and asked if he could take charge, and McKenzie was on the roster from then on.

“I’ve had some good bosses and some bad ones, and I learnt as much from the bad ones,” McKenzie reckons. At De Vere in Bourne-mouth he found out “how you can look good on the outside while being run very shoddily from within – a useful lesson if you want to have miserable staff”.

### SCOTLAND’S UGLIEST?

But the person who had the biggest effect on his career was Peter Swan, manager of the Thistle hotel in Edinburgh. Prince Charles had called the property “Scotland’s ugliest building” before McKenzie arrived. “It was grey, concrete and part of a shopping centre,” he says, “but Peter showed me that you can get a long way by making the most of what you have. We were fighting the icons in the city, the Caledonian and the Balmoral, and we had to make it work.”

And thus McKenzie has translated experiences in a Scottish urban landscape to the rural Home Counties. It sounds unlikely, but with the help of Michael’s funds, McKenzie has transformed an underdog upstart into one of the UK’s major country house hotels with much that he learnt in Edinburgh.

“But I’m no better a hotelier than someone in charge of a four-star property in Northampton,” McKenzie insists. Surely he can’t be serious? “I really mean it, yes. People arriving at a five-star venue have expectations that tend to match reality. When you’re running a midmarket hotel in middle England your customer’s assumptions are all over the place. People who work in those places are the real heroes.”

### WATCH THE VIDEO



See Andrew McKenzie celebrating his win at [www.caterersearch.com/hotelier2008](http://www.caterersearch.com/hotelier2008)

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The Very Essence of Burgundy