



SPIRIT OF THE LAWS

From travelling the world and working in an array of sectors, to being honoured by the Queen for his services, Dr **Vic Laws** MBE FCSI has had quite the career. “I love the work I do,” he tells Michael Jones

Spending time in the company of Vic Laws as the veteran consultant discusses his career is an industry education in itself. Firstly, there is barely an area of hospitality he has not had experience of at some level or another – from high-end hotels and restaurants, to overseeing the catering operations for stadia, schools, hospitals, care-homes, prisons, airports and airlines. It also ticks off a plethora of iconic UK institutions he has stories about (Wembley Stadium; Heathrow Airport; Windsor Castle; even the rock band The Who). All the while, the conversation saunters through a whistle-stop global tour of countries Laws has worked or trained in: Switzerland, Mexico, Canada, Ireland, Cyprus, Sudan...

So, after such a fêted career, which includes being made a Member of the British Empire (MBE) by the Queen, at 78 Laws must surely be considering retirement? Not at all, it transpires. “I’m a workaholic. I love the work I do,” he says.

“There are always challenges out there and there are always people you can help and guide. I have gained a lot from this profession and now I want to give back and help others to be successful.”

For Laws, that means being involved with the Réunion des Gastronomes and the young chef’s competition for Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. It means continuing his role as restaurant ambassador for The Clink, the charity he has worked with for over 10 years, more recently fundraising and creating awareness both within and outside the hospitality industry.

A past president and fellow of the Institute of Hospitality (IoH) and an active member of FCSI, Lead Association for Caterers in Education (LACA) and Association of Catering Excellence (ACE), Laws is also on the board of the Royal Over-Seas League, an 80-bed club in Mayfair, London, where we photograph him for this story. The shoot involves him performing the sabrage ritual (opening Champagne with a sabre) of the Sabre

d’Or in full traditional costume.

“When people ask me what I do, I say I eat and drink for a living, which is true,” he laughs.

Learning to fly

Despite this storied life in hospitality, Laws pretty much stumbled into the business. “As a youngster, my ambition was either to be a policeman or a lawyer. Unfortunately, I wasn’t academic enough to do either. I loved cooking, so becoming a chef was my next choice,” he says.

“I lived in Harrow, Greater London, with my parents and my sister, who was extremely clever. I was always in her shadow, except when it came to cooking. My mother was a good cook and I learned the basics from her. I used to enter cookery competitions for the local horticultural society and I did quite well.”

Laws attended a co-educational grammar school. “At the age of 14, you had to stream. The choices were woodwork, metalwork, technical drawing, needlework or cookery. I chose cookery because I wasn’t any good at the others, but one of the incentives was there were 30 girls in the group – that informed my decision-making a bit. I did cookery for a couple of years at school and said to my parents, ‘I want to be a chef.’ Neither of my parents were in hospitality, so it was something completely new to them.”

In 1958 Laws had an interview for a chefs’ course at Acton Hotel School (now University of West London). The principal persuaded him to take a hotel operations course. At the end of the second year he got a job as a commis de débarrasseur at Restaurant Schutzenhaus in Switzerland.

“Victor Ceserani taught me how to cook, but also to have time for other people”



Dressed in the traditional costume to perform the sabrage ritual – opening a bottle of Champagne with a sabre

“It was a five-star restaurant and I learned a lot, including the fact that I didn’t know as much as I thought I did, so I returned to college for another year,” says Laws. “Acton, in those days, was one of the best colleges in the country and I had a great instructor in Victor Ceserani MBE, who was one of the first television chefs in the UK. He not only taught me how to cook but also, more importantly, to have time for other people.”

Leaving college in 1961, Laws went to work as a trainee manager in the 750-bed Mount Royal Hotel in Oxford Street, London. “I was there for nine months. I learned that I didn’t particularly like hotels,” he says.

Laws left and began working as assistant catering officer for the City of St Albans. This started a seven-year stint in local government that would later take him to Coventry, where he was promoted to deputy catering superintendent, managing 19 restaurants and outside catering, before he ended up running the Cliffs Pavilion, a multi-purpose entertainment centre seating nearly 1,200 people in Southend, on the Thames estuary. “At the time, offshore radio, such as Radio Caroline, was just starting out, so we used to run pop concerts for bands such as The Who on a Saturday night.”

Believing he needed more sales >

“I am a shy person. However, there is a difference when you wear a ‘badge’ and organise things. I’m a team player – as long as I lead the team”

experience on his CV, Laws left in 1964, working for Associated Fisheries selling delicatessen products to hospitals, prisons and institutional establishments.

“I learned selling wasn’t for me but it was an introduction to hospitals and prisons, which was useful in later life with The Clink,” he says. “I knew I wanted to stay in catering. I loved hospitality and working with people.”

Taking flight

In 1968 Laws joined Forte as catering manager at Luton Airport when it was “a couple of tin shacks and a terminal building”. Forte won the inflight catering contract for Britannia Airways (now Thompson) kickstarting 10 years of inflight catering experience with Laws ending up director for Western Europe, based at Heathrow. “We ran catering at airports in the UK, Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin. I used to fly all over the place to see people from Alitalia and Turkish Airlines. I also went to Sudan to have a look at catering out there.”

In 1979 Laws was headhunted to join Grandmet (now Compass), where he ran their airport company with operations in the UK and Mexico. Ultimately Grandmet decided airports were “not for them” and at the same time, in 1981, Laws was headhunted to join ARA (now Aramark) to run its catering and leisure divisions, the latter of which at that time held just one contract, with Chelsea Football Club.

The first tender Laws and his team won was for Wembley Stadium, which

had been with the previous caterer, Letheby and Christopher, for 57 years.

In 1983 Laws left ARA and joined Spinneys, which was owned by the financial organisation British and Commonwealth Shipping. “At that time [UK prime minister] Margaret Thatcher was trying to break the stranglehold the unions had on the domestic services in the NHS. We started a company using the expertise Spinneys had in the Middle East to set up a hotel services company specialising in cleaning catering and laundry services. We were ahead of our time, but Spinneys were impatient for profit and decided they would pull out of the NHS. How wrong they were as now nearly 50% of services are run by the private sector.”

Going solo

In 1986, Laws was approached by David Hutchins, who had been his managing director at Grandmet and Spinneys, to do some consulting for Kalamazoo, who were looking at computer costing systems and wanted to sell into hospitals. “David once told me, ‘If you don’t enjoy doing a job then don’t do it’. So, I started doing that and the consultancy just grew.”

Laws was instrumental in setting up what is now ISS catering services before establishing catering in hospitals for Taylorplan, subsequently taken over by Gardner Merchant (now Sodexo). “Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) was being introduced to local government and my experience of contracting came into play. I started consulting for Surrey County Council, my first local authority (LA).”

From there, Laws worked with over 60 LAs across the UK. “I was also to become catering consultant to Mars in Western Europe and worked for many care homes. One of my most interesting jobs was to be consultant with Lansdowne Road Rugby Stadium [now Aviva] in Dublin, with another FCSI consultant from Canada,” he says.

“When I set up AVL Consultancy I did

not want to build a large organisation, as I had worked within so many companies where I was involved with re-structuring and redundancies, so I chose to work with a few selected individuals and helped to start up quite a few of our present FCSI Professional members. I still have clients who I have worked with for over 30 years and, luckily, they’re still going strong.”

Laws also moved into association management, running FCSI UK & Ireland for many years as well as LACA and ACE, where he is still the business manager. “I am basically a shy person,” he says. “However, there is a difference when you wear a ‘badge’ when you go to events or organise things. I am a team player – as long as I lead the team,” he laughs.

Leading the way for so many years led to Laws receiving the honour of an MBE in 2012 for his services to British hospitality. “I was asked if I wanted to go to Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle to be invested. I chose Windsor as I had been to the Palace twice before. I was lucky enough to have Her Majesty to do the presentation.

That was a great weekend as on the previous Friday I had been given an honorary doctorate from the University of West London, my old college.”

While showing no sign of slowing down professionally, Laws does like to relax via a new-found love of horseracing. “Recently I have taken up shared ownership in race horses through Highclere Racing. I have been part-owner in three, so far. It’s great fun. You don’t do it to make money, although that would be nice, but the company and the atmosphere is enjoyable and so different.”

Doing something for the love of it – and trying different things – is a clear theme in Laws’ life and career. It has afforded him the chance to experience more aspects of the hospitality sector than most could imagine. Laws’ law therefore is a simple one: variety is the spice of life, so long as people are at the heart of what you do. “Nothing beats being with people,” he says. ■

GIVING BACK

There is some competition for Laws’ proudest professional achievement, but he opts for becoming president of the HCIMA (now IoH) in 1998.

“I represented them across the world. I did tours to Cyprus, where I met the Cypriot president, and to Canada, where I lectured university students. I still strongly believe in supporting our professional bodies and I am currently honorary president of the IoH in London and on the Friends Committee of the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts,” he says.

“There are always challenges out there and there are always people you can help and guide. I have gained a lot from this profession and now I want to give back and help others to be successful.”

Laws believes the most important business lesson he has learned is, “be honest with clients and customers and don’t be afraid to speak your mind. In consultancy if you don’t get on with the client then you won’t do a good job – so hand it to somebody else. Integrity and honesty are both very important to me.”



Her Majesty the Queen presenting Laws with an MBE for his services to British hospitality in 2012