

The Town is the Menu Artists Report

I arrived in Huntly with a clear plan of action:

1. Get to know the local chefs and find one enthusiastic, talented person to work closely with
2. Set up interactions with the public and 'somehow' gather the stories needed to inspire a Signature Menu
3. 'Somehow' translate the stories into a menu that fits the criteria of various stakeholders
4. Launch the Signature Menu at interesting events around the town (which is what I am mostly known for)

So only the 'somehows' still needed a little thought. Easy.

On my first evening I joined the Halloween Hairst committee meeting. This was a sudden and surprising immersion into the town; a slower way of working, interesting characters and time-weathered relationships, history and tradition, pride, resignation and ambition. All at once there was a rather vague parallel project to mine with a requirement for some inspired input from me and I realised that with the residency came the expectation that I would contribute to many aspects of town life. So it begins.

Day One brought the first of many doorstep meetings with business owners and potential partners, always anxious encounters but fruitful without exception. My acquaintances back home had liked the idea of The Town is the Menu and so, to my relief, did the townsfolk. The ultimate need to address the first 'somehow' also dawned. The Bee Happy Festival was 10 days away and I was booked to appear with my project table to 'do something'. What? Some sort of workshop that would bring people willingly to my table, engage, inform and entertain them and ultimately elicit the menu inspirations. On past such occasions I have called in the professionals, workshop-savvy artists who would leap fearlessly into action. Now it was my turn and uncomfortable though I felt, I knew this was one of the learning curves I had come here seeking.

A number of restless nights and many creative conversations with Deveron Arts associates later the model was cast. I would play the Minister for Menus, apparently sent north to survey the tastes of Huntly and to gather inspiration for a new Signature Menu for the town. Food was the bait of course, advertised Free! but in fact swapped for local stories.

First, participants would loosen up their tasting equipment with a tongue twister (we're-taking-some-time-to-test-the-taste-of-the-toast-of-Huntly), then a jellybean flavour test would sort the wheat from the chaff (they all passed) before a Huntly Tasting Committee was proclaimed. That done, I would explain Dr. Ernest Boring's famous(ly incorrect) Tongue Tastebud Map with salt, sour, sweet and bitter zones and joke that a common local mutation had produced stovie, shortbread, ice cream and tattie soup zones. Finally we would be ready to hand out survey forms and exchange alimentation for information and discussion.

I hand-drew the Ministry for Menus Survey Form, apparently to create a friendly aesthetic but in fact to indulge my enjoyment of the non-computer based work that living and working in a small town allowed. The questions - If your next meal were to be your last what would you choose? Describe Huntly in 3 words. Share an interesting story you might

tell a stranger about Huntly - all lifted from previous projects I had created. A costume was needed and since my Minister character was on a 'site visit' I penned Menu Under Construction on the back of a hi-vis vest – in doing so unknowingly creating the iconic image of the project.

It seemed to work, people liked it, they really liked it, and I was left with a healthy pile of survey forms. Great. The gathering had begun and would continue for weeks all around the town.

The door step meetings also continued and as with the Hairst committee, I encountered a rich cast of characters who stress-tested my skills of communication and empathy in drawing them in to become project activists. Nevertheless they did and I was struck by the warm and positive reception my ideas received. My meeting with Keira Allan, a young chef running the kitchen at the Huntly Hotel, happened by chance, I gave the briefest of overviews and she responded with open-faced enthusiasm and impatient excitement. I knew immediately that I had found my chef partner and I learned that the highs in this very methodical project, when they came, were 'punch the air and shout out loud' good.

The path to the Halloween Hairst was a winding but ultimately enjoyable one which gave an opportunity to fast-track one of the Signature Menu dishes. Keira and I met, talked it round a few times and the dish was born. I hoped that the second 'somehow' (how to translate inspirations into the other dishes) would become clear equally painlessly.

The approach of the Hairst also focussed my mind on the need to accelerate planning for the finale events and here I came unstuck. This was supposed to be the easy bit, my forte, but I felt pummelled by the ever-present epilogues of brilliant and fondly remembered Deveron Arts residencies and unable to see how my project could hope to pass muster. This was a difficult period when I felt in a constant fog and unsure which way to go, it was unsettling and unpleasant but I hoped that this unfamiliar way of working would teach me something important about the creative process. It did and I feel better equipped now for my future work. In the end, after much thought and discussion with the Deveron Arts team, I realised that no finale show-stopper was needed. The Big Idea was the process of the project and the output was the Signature Menu, not an event, other than what was needed to see the Menu understood, adopted and visible.

The challenge of presenting the project and a new dish at the Castle on a snowy Halloween night brought problems and then solutions and good ideas. I opted to use paper plates attached to wires for signage and a thought stirred that Huntly's last supper inspirations could morph into Death Row Dinners in apt spooky fashion. Later that week, at the Farmers Market, young artists inked Death Row Dinner Portraits onto paper plate canvasses for sitters warmed with complimentary Tattie Soup.

It was time to winkle five chefs from the security of their kitchens, to present the research findings in a succinct way and to catalyse a new menu. Word clouds gave a snapshot view of the 'last suppers' and '3 words' and I retold a dozen 'stories' that had resounded with me. The chefs, out of their habitat, ran for the cover of their usual repertoire but by seizing on isolated comments and steering the discussion in interesting directions the meeting lasted an hour and a half and produced three pages of scribbled minutes. Would it be enough? I thought not but by some miracle the minutes reduced down to 15 dishes and a draft menu of which the chefs and Deveron Arts team unanimously approved (after substantial tweaking). For me the greatest pleasure was seeing in the menu the faces of all those people who had inspired it, every details given absolute integrity by a direct link to

one or several of them.

Renowned chef Richard Allen came to Huntly to add an outsider's eye and some polish to the Menu, to test and photograph the dishes before a tasting and presentation to the stakeholders of the project. It was such a huge relief and a proud moment to gain their enthusiastic approval, until that moment which was almost nine weeks into the residency, I had felt no certainty that the work would produce anything of value, now it had.

The rest was plain sailing. Collating recipe information, confirming participating outlets, helping to arrange print and media coverage, and planning the menu launch at the December Farmers Market.

The lack of quality bread in Huntly had always been a talking point in the Deveron Arts office and at some point a side-project idea of a Signature Loaf arose. To make it happen I invited an award-winning artisan baker from Edinburgh, Drew Massey, to come and work with J&I Smith Bakery in Huntly. The two parties were equally cautious about making a firm commitment and with 48 hours to go until the scheduled bake off in the last week of the project, there was little certainty that either contributor would turn up. Weeks earlier when at a low ebb I had convinced myself that the creation of a Signature Loaf would 'save' the project but given the rapturous reception to the finished menu I now considered the loaf an optional 'cherry on top'. Somewhat magically, the baker and the bakery stepped up to the mark and in no time we had not one but three truly brilliant Signature Loaves. These were also launched at the Farmers Market and 40 loaves sold out in 90 minutes. So it turned out the Signature Loaf was vital to the project, after all.

My The Town is the Menu residency is now all but complete. Looking back, I am amazed at how much we packed into it and also that we have arrived through the fog at exactly the place we set out for. It has built my confidence to stride into the unknown again and helped me to believe in my creative ability. Eight local businesses have adopted the Menu, local chefs have stepped into the light (one in particular) and have had the reaffirmation that people care about what they cook. The bakery wants to produce artisan loaves and is looking for outlets. The supermarkets want to sell ingredients for the Signature Menu dishes and Deveron Arts are looking for more ways to disseminate the recipes. The media, locally such the Huntly Express and nationally such as BBC Radio Scotland, have championed the project and want to see it continue in some form. Small fires of possibility are burning everywhere and hopefully some will catch. Huntly alone has a Signature Menu and with it, a healthier food culture. All things considered, I could hardly have hoped for more. Thanks Huntly, it's been an adventure.

Simon Preston
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