

A COMMENT FROM OUR LOCAL PRESS



We drive over the bridge with the Silverstone track below us and both Online Head of News Ali and I instinctively wince as a Formula 1 car screeches under us and reverberates through both us and the car. It's exciting – having never heard a Formula 1 car live before we're fascinated. But we're here for food monthly and it's food on our minds not speed no matter how sexy we've already decided Formula 1 is. In fact the excitement and thrill of Formula 1 permeates the whole five hours we spend at Silverstone during tyre-testing week to talk to two remarkable men.

Steven Saunders and Sean Valentine of the Aspire Group, based in Eversley, are handling the catering for the British Grand Prix – an absolutely massive, and prestigious, feat. How many mouths to feed, to a crowd who've paid top whack just to enter the hallowed racing ground? "Oh just around 250,000" says the genial Sean, the man behind the organisational side of the company. Sean admits its "tough". I'd have said it's a nightmare but both Steven and Sean look relaxed and you believe them when they say it's a labour of love. It would have to be - they have a core staff of around 11 which swells to a massive 3,000 during the week with around 125 chefs to manage.

That's a big ask. 125 chefs in charge of the menus designed by the other half of Aspire, creative director Steven Saunders, a small man with a great sense of humour and the

ability to remain fairly unflappable. Aspire cater for everything from small coffee shops to fine dining with every permutation in between on the 880-acre site. They also look after the British Racing Drivers Club and do the catering for the club's ball. The day we were there Damien Hill had dropped by for lunch.

So how do they ensure those 125 chefs manage to cook Steven's organic and creative menus just like the master himself? "It's all about planning," says Steven. "From lunch to afternoon tea and dinner we put the recipes and methods with pictures on laminated boards all around the circuit catering areas so the chefs know exactly what they have to do." The company is driven,



Formula 1 style, by quality. Says Sean: "Everything is as fresh as we can get it and we like to think of it as more home cooked than other large hospitality catering. "For example anyone who's been to events like these would be used to getting chicken or salmon with salad – we've put dishes like Daub of Beef and Braised lamb shank on our menus."

The menus are rigorously tested and dishes may change four or five times until they've got them right. Says Sean: "Many people who come to Silverstone are spending £750 a day so their lunch had better be good. "But of course whether it's someone who simply buys a sandwich to a McLaren hosted lunch we give

all our food and our service 100 plus per cent!" Steven agrees. "This year we'll have crab with caviar, the best quail, chicken with lemons and tarragon. It's sexy food." It's the attention to detail and innovation that make the Aspire team good enough to win a gig like Silverstone Says Sean: "You get people sitting on the bank watching the grand Prix and



they don't want to move so this year we provided a pizza delivery service and we send in an army of jetpackers with coffee, tea, beer and wine" And as we tour the vast site to the cacophony of the engines (by now Ali and I – whose video of the day you

can see on www.gtreading.co.uk - are fairly hoarse from shouting and have decided exciting as it is we're not petrol heads) we can see the little touches Aspire do that make its catering proper food theatre. Giant Perspex vases will be filled with ice and fruit de mers and placed by the cooking areas, (and will have to be redone every day of the week), spatchcock chickens and steaks will be cooked on griddles in front of people and salad stations will be carefully crafted to make the most of the freshest leaves and vegetables. By now we've zoomed round most of the vast catering areas in Sean's car. We stop by one of the corporate hospitality boxes and Sandra Knotley who for 16 seasons has leased a box to clients right on the starting grid,

extols Sean and Steven's praises while pouring us a generous glass of fizz. "You just can't compare them to others," she says. "They are much more personal about everything and give the service and food a much more personal touch. The feedback I've had from clients has been great. They really are excellent." We head off for

something to eat but behind the scenes the Aspire team is toiling hard so there's no chance to sample Steven's food. We agree we'll try it out at the New Mill at Eversley which the guys took over last year (it's a tough job sometimes) and opt for a quick sandwich in the coffee shop, also Aspire-catered which they're proud of because they've introduced Costa coffee. We talk more about Steven's philosophy about food and it's hard to keep him from bouncing around, so enthusiastic is he. "I love to be fresh and spontaneous," he smiles, "and that, I think, is what I've brought to the company." We've chronicled Steven's experience before in food monthly (Savoy-trained, Michelin star, Fellow Master chef of Great Britain and much more) so I ask him what he likes to cook at home. "The same kind of food as I do for the big events," he replies. "I grow my herbs at my home in Spain and sometimes I'll just throw dishes together. It may be obvious and it may have been said before but if you've got great ingredients you don't need to do anything complicated."

Sean smiles at his company's creative force, like a proud uncle. Both Sean and Steven's enthusiasm are the reasons this pioneering company will always be on the winners' podium, whether at a grand prix or not. "What you have to do," explains Sean, "is aspire to excel".