Pandemic closed one of North Wales' top restaurants so owners took bistro meals into people's homes

A couple who closed their highly rated North Wales restaurant after lockdowns hit hospitality have found success by taking bistro dining into people's homes.

Rowan and Imogen Hodgson started On The Hill in Ruthin back in 2008.

It came after years of Rowen working as a chef and Imogen front of house in venues around the UK and across the world.

Despite signing to take on the site a week before the financial crash the venue proved a success and built up a fantastic reputation.

They added the tapas style Small Plates at a unit two doors down from the restaurant in 2019.

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Imogen said: “It took us three years to get it really successful and Rowan and I were there every service without fail for those three years.

“It was a really nice steady business and then got bigger and bigger, and busier and busier.”

Rowan said: “We opened Small Plates on the back of On The Hill being so popular, we had 25 staff over the two sites, it was a great business.”

Lockdown then hit – leaving the sites closed and no income coming in at On The Hill, although they did later start takeaways from the Small Plates site.

They said the landlord of On The Hill was patient but it reached a point where they decided they had to walk away.

Rowan added: “The landlord wasn’t putting pressure on but we were conscious we were not paying him rent.

“It was a small, intimate place with a lack of ventilation, we thought ‘can we ever open again?’ We just didn’t know so we had to say to him ‘our time has come’ because we didn’t want to string him along for another six months.”

The takeaway operation was working out of Small Plates – which remains open – and last autumn they created The Sorbus Tree, offering packaged bistro meals at home.

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They were joined in the business by fellow director Hannah Bramley, who had worked for the couple at On The Hill previously. There are a total of seven staff who were able to come with the new business.

Rowan said: “Christmas was fantastic for us, there were a lot who came to the restaurants but then new customers as well.”

Rowan and Imogen Hodgson and Hannah Bramley, directors of The Sorbus Tree in Ruthin
(Image: Sorbus tree)
It was hard work in the small site in the centre of town and a new kitchens and storage unit was opened in May on the trade park in Ruthin after a major renovation of the site.

Imogen said: “It was a learning curve but we did get help from Welsh Government and Cywain, that has been great. We are still learning.”

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Hannah said: “So much goes into that takeaway side, the packaging and labelling, and online. It does not happen overnight.”

They now deliver all along the North Wales coast and into Cheshire and people come from near and far to pick up bistro meals.

Rowan, who buys as much produce as possible locally, added: “While a lot of customers who dined with us now come for deliveries I think some of the older people who aren’t on the internet still perhaps don’t know we are here.

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“So many people know us as Rowan and Imogen from On The Hill, we got to know thousands of people and it’s about letting those thousands of people know we are still here.

“The food we offer is what we did at On the Hill, our flavours, our spins on things, dishes created by us, it is still us cooking, we didn’t lose any chefs so it is really is On the Hill but at home.”

After an incredibly busy first half of the year they had a small dip as the weather improved and hospitality reopened but they are now gearing up for a busy winter period.

Imogen said: “I think there are some people still wary about eating out. We expect another busy winter.”

With the unit they now hope to expand further with plans potentially including selling meals through retail sites. They also continue to do outside catering for events like weddings and local shoots.

Hannah added: “Between everything it is non-stop – there is a lot going on.”

The On The Hill site has now been taken on by the Fat Boar pub group and will reopen under their branding in the coming months.

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