



Campaspe Country House

A Country House Hotel and Restaurant Woodend

Milton Collins: Former Owner & Managing Director

The Product

Campaspe Country House is a landmark property of Woodend, 45 minutes drive from central Melbourne. The 1927 homestead sits on 32 acres, surrounded by an Edna Walling garden and natural bushland.

Between 2003 and 2007 it was owned and operated by Milton Collins – a successful accountant and small business advisor. Together with his wife, Liz, they rejuvenated the long-standing business. Under their ownership it rapidly grew to become one of regional Victoria's most reputable conference and weekend leisure facilities.

During a year-long Australia-wide search for a suitable property, Collins was able to reflect upon his strengths and weaknesses. This enabled him to clearly identify the additional skills he needed to recruit.

The Challenge

Collins' previous career taught him that he needed to build a business that he could work 'on' rather than work 'in'. He also knew that it needed to be developed into a business and a brand that was not reliant upon him being present. Documented structure and processes would not only ensure that it could function independent of his day to day control, but it would also make it a highly saleable product when he chose to move on.

Having worked in regional Victoria for several years, he was also aware of the challenges in recruiting, training and retaining staff when located away from the metropolitan area. Ironically, he says that the 'tree-change' lifestyle trend has not made recruiting suitable staff any easier in the hospitality industry.

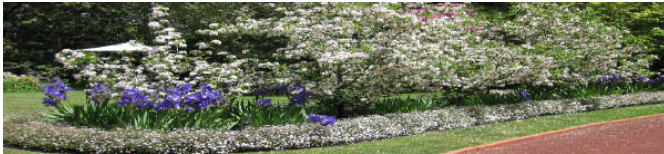


He realised that in order to build a premium conference and leisure product it was essential to strive for the highest service standards. However, he quickly found that the hospitality industry suffered from the problem of transient, casual employment and the perception of poor career pathways. He says that many people enter the hospitality industry by default and often don't have any aspirational career direction.

The Strategy

In order to overcome the perception of hospitality industry jobs as part time, 'pocket-money' jobs. Collins made the decision to offer mainly full time positions, with agreed minimum hours. All staff were provided with job descriptions, key performance indicators and underwent regular performance appraisals.

" They clearly understood what was expected of them, what they would be measured on and what training would be provided in order to meet the high standards.



“ We told them that it was going to be tough working at Campaspe House, because of the high standards we upheld. While we were really clear upfront that we expected top performance, we also emphasised that we were in the ‘fun’ business. If the staff are professional and have fun in their delivery, that not only makes their day more enjoyable, but it also comes across to the guests. It’s contagious.

“ We established a strong ethic that everything they did had to have a guest focus – it’s hard to get that culture across and it needs to be reinforced on a daily basis. I worked among them and they knew that there was nothing I wouldn’t do “.

A lot of time was devoted to recruitment. Wide-spread advertising was used, but the management relied heavily on word-of-mouth within the industry and the reputation of Campaspe Country House.

A major component of Campaspe Country House’s enviable reputation was its commitment to high quality food and wine, especially boasting a strong regional flavour. In an industry notorious for not being able to attract and retain cooking staff, Milton Collins not only managed to attract high calibre people, but also retained them.

He worked closely with two local secondary schools with strong hospitality departments and very good training kitchens. Several of the students worked at Campaspe House for 1, 2 or 3 days a week and several of the placements led to apprenticeships.

Fortnightly training was held for food and beverage staff which covered a range of issues and encouraged multi-skilling. Senior staff with more experience or those with particular interests often took a training session. Sommeliers and wine makers were invited to make presentations, and staff visited local vineyards for combined educational and social functions.

Collins admits that it can be very frustrating to train staff to a high standard, only to lose them to other places.

“Even though it’s frustrating, we believed that we were still better off doing our best to train them to the highest possible standard. If they chose to leave then so be it, but at least we were getting the benefit on that training while they were with us. If every employer did their bit to train staff to high standards, we would all benefit from having a much larger pool of talent to choose from”.

The Results

Collins says that although his commitment to provide full time work for staff was difficult, it did improve staff retention. He managed to build-up staff numbers to cover the businesses expansion. The higher level of staffing also avoided major disruption to operations that could have resulted from turn-over.

The setting of high standards not only paid dividends in reputation, but made it easier for Campaspe House to attract staff. Collins says that Campaspe House’s commitment to local food and wine was also an employment drawcard. The business not only managed to retain chefs for much longer than the industry norm, but also attracted a high calibre of apprentices.

