

Campaspe Country House
A Country House Hotel and Restaurant, Woodend
Milton Collins: Managing Director and Owner



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.

Its acquisition in 2003 by Milton Collins - a successful accountant and small business advisor – and his wife Liz, rejuvenated the long-standing business. It has rapidly grown to become one of regional Victoria's most reputable conference and weekend leisure facilities.

Collins searched Australia-wide for a suitable property within hour of a capital city and close to a major airport. It's location in the heart of the Macedon region also allowed him to indulge his passion for food and wine, which he has made a distinguishing feature of the business.

During the year's search he was also able to reflect upon his strengths and weaknesses, which enabled him to clearly identify the additional skills he needed to recruit.

The very high customer service standards established by Campaspe Country House has resulted in solid word-of-mouth endorsement. The hotel's 20 rooms will double in the near future and there are also plans to increase the restaurant to cater for up to 130 guests.

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 at Campaspe Country House. His staff have jobs with agreed minimum hours. All staff are provided with job descriptions, key performance indicators and undergo regular performance appraisals. They clearly understand what is expected of them, what they will be measured on and what training will be provided in order to meet the high standards.

" We tell them that it is going to be tough working here, because of the high standards we maintain. I say that I can give them a list of other places they can work if they want an easier job. While we are really clear up front that we expect top level performance, we also emphasise that we are in the fun business. Guests come here to be not only well looked after, but to really enjoy it and have fun. If the staff are professional and have fun in their delivery, then that not only makes their day enjoyable, but it also comes across to the guests. It's contagious.

" We have a strong ethos that everything they do must have a guest focus – it's hard to get that culture across and it needs to be reinforced on a daily basis. I work among them, so they know that there is nothing I will not do. Without the right people we don't have a business – it's fundamental to our success."

A lot of time is devoted to recruitment. Widespread advertising is certainly used, but the management relies heavily on word-of-mouth within the industry and the reputation of Campaspe Country House. To capitalise on the large numbers of local people commuting to Melbourne each day, Collins negotiated billboard advertising at Woodend Railway Station, which encourages those tired of travelling to consider working locally at Campaspe Country House.

We are in the process of developing a personal training and development program for every staff member. Collins admits that it is frustrating to train staff to a high standard, only to lose them to other places.

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

A major component of Campaspe Country House’s enviable reputation is 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 has not only managed to attract high calibre people, but has retained them.

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

Fortnightly training is held for food and beverage staff, which covers a range of issues and encourages multi-skilling. Senior staff with more experience or those with particular interests often lead a training session. Sommeliers and wine makers are invited to make presentations, and staff visit local vineyards for combined educational and social functions.

The chefs and apprentice cooks have weekly meetings involving some form of training, as well as regularly go out as a group to sample and critique other restaurants.

In March 2006, Campaspe Country House’s Head Chef, Brad Lobb, won the International Association of Conference Centre’s Australian Chef of the Year, following a national ‘cook-off’. He was one of six chefs to compete in the world championship held in North America, where he also spent some time working in San Francisco’s famous Berkeley Hotel. He arrived back at Woodend fired with new ideas and has now been Head Chef for four years.

The Results

Collins reports that although his commitment to provide full time work for staff was difficult, it has improved staff retention. He has built-up staff numbers to cover the businesses expansion. The higher levels of staffing also avoids major disruption to operations resulting from turn over.

The setting of high standards has not only paid dividends in reputation, but has made it easier for Campaspe House to attract staff. It recently secured a high calibre Operations Manager, who was attracted by the businesses reputation and standards. Collins says that Campaspe House's commitment to local food and wine has also been a particular employment drawcard. The business not only manages to retain its chefs for much longer periods than the industry norm, but also attracts a high calibre of apprentices.

“ Our customer feedback tells us that our guests are overwhelmed by what we consider to be simply good service, but it seems to be such a rare attribute these days, at all levels of the industry.”