



The bargain hunter

Maison Chaplais Maurice Chaplais, deli owner and bakery consultant

Despite his years of experience in craft baking, café operations and retailing, Maurice Chaplais was still nervous the first time he bought at auction. But now he says it's a great way to fit out your kitchen on a tight budget.

Type 'bakery consultant uk' into Google and the name Maurice Chaplais pops up among the top 10 results.

This Cheltenham deli-café owner (whose father was French and who thus pronounces his Christian name 'Mor-reece') enjoys a lucrative sideline as a consultant and trainer in 'real' bread-making.

In fact, it's more than a sideline: he spends half the year flying round the world, helping set up artisan bakeries in locations from Bangalore to Barbados, and currently has a contract with the US government to take European-style craft baking skills to Domenica as part of its aid programme.

Chaplais began his career in hotel management, then worked for various specialist bakeries and equipment suppliers before starting his own artisan bakery-cum-deli, The Flour Bag, in the Cotswolds. He ran it for 15 years, winning plaudits from the trade and even attracting the occasional TV crew, before selling up and moving to the US, where he again ran his own bakery and kicked off his consultancy business.

When he returned to Britain for family reasons he worked as general manager for an Oxford café chain to find his feet again before setting up on his own in Cheltenham. But after their American adventure, he and wife Nanette – who runs the deli-café during her husband's overseas trips – had to borrow £90,000 to get Maison Chaplais off the ground. And a tight budget meant taking a canny approach to fitting out the shop, its small upstairs café and its even smaller kitchen.

"I didn't taken the normal route of going to mainstream suppliers," Chaplais says. "The shop itself was just a shell – it used to sell Zimmer frames – which meant I had to spend a lot just reconfiguring it. So I decided to buy as much equipment as I could at auction."

Over a period of four months, he became a regular at Hilditch Auctioneers' fortnightly sale of catering equipment at Malmesbury, Wilts. "I had never been to an auction before," he says, "but I soon got the hang of it. I was bidding against dealers from London, but you are in with a good chance there because

dealers have a clear cut-off point: once they reach the point where they can't double up on the price, they pull out."

Chaplais admits his first auction was "quite intimidating" but he quickly became streetwise. He would spend several hours at the salerooms on preview days, taking along a Nisbets catering equipment catalogue to get a feel for prices, and even turning up with an extension lead and temperature probe so he could power-up refrigerators and make sure they were working.

"At the previews I would isolate what I wanted to bid for and by going back again and again over four months I eventually bought everything I needed."

Much of the hardware on sale was brand new, sent to the saleroom by manufacturers such as Fosters because of slight cosmetic blemishes. "If it didn't sell at auction you could even go back to them afterwards and haggle," says Chaplais.

His bargain purchases were all pukka commercial brands, not domestic units, and he says he could never have afforded to





fit out Maison Chaplais to its current high specification by buying at list price. "For example, I've got a commercial six-burner gas stove that cost £350 brand new at auction. You're looking at £2,500 from a dealer. I also paid about £300 for a £2,000 oven.

"The commercial fridges were all new too and they cost about a quarter of the catalogue price – in one case I paid £500 for a £1,900 fridge. Without buying at auction I would probably have spent another £30,000 getting this place up and running."

There were, however, some areas where he decided to take a more conventional buying route – for example, on hygienic fittings where his main priority was to satisfy the local EHO. Another was his coffee machine. "I would never buy a cappuccino machine at auction. They are such tricky bits of kit."

The other hardware bought direct from the maker also represented his single biggest expense: the Arneg serve-over cabinets for the ground-floor deli. "If your cabinets are tacky and second-hand they're going to let down your shop," says Chaplais. "I got in touch with the different manufacturers of deli cases, checked them all out and came to the conclusion that Arneg was the name I wanted to go with. All the supermarkets seem to buy Arneg and that tells you they must be reliable."

Before the deal was finalised, however, Arneg put Chaplais in touch with Mike Mellor of kitchen consultant Space Catering. "You've got to choose cabinets that are going to fit in

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your building," says Chaplais, "and it's quite difficult to visualise when you are looking at a blank space. Mike was extremely helpful – he acted as a facilitator and did architectural drawings to find the best configuration."

Chaplais recommends using a good, independent advisor when looking at major purchases like the Arneg cabinets, which cost around £15,000. "When I'm doing my bakery consultancy I find people have been advised to buy all sorts of things they don't need by pushy sales people. I say to them, 'I can save you my consultancy fee just by telling you what you *don't* need to buy.' Someone like Mike Mellor is not pushy – he's quiet, he gives good advice and he knows all the top brands."

Although one of the mass-market, priced distributors can be good for standard or generic items – for example, Chaplais bought

his Electrolux heavy-duty blender from www.nesbits.co.uk – his view is that they should be avoided for key equipment. He particularly advises against buying real bargain-basement brands. If it looks too good to be true, it probably is. "I always go for the top names rather than those third-brand coffee machines or fridges that you see be sold extremely cheap in catalogues. Again, I've seen this in my consultancy work, where I've advised buying a particular brand but the client has decided to save money with a cheapskate machine from Spain and it has broken down within a year."

He continues: "Your most important pieces of equipment are your cooking and cooling facilities. It's a mistake to economise on those – particularly the cooling side, because the EHO is so on your case these days about keeping within the right temperature bands. If you need to economise, do it on the aesthetic things – like the leather sofa in our café, which came second-hand from a five-star hotel in London."

Although he spends half his time spreading the word about real bread, Chaplais doesn't currently bake much on his own premises – just sandwich bread – partly because he only has A1 planning permission. "I have to keep it very low key because it's primarily a deli. I make soups, I roast meats, I make sandwich fillings and we do bake-off baguettes and croissants. But I also use it as a laboratory for my consultancy work – I've got six or seven projects bubbling away in there."

w: www.chaplais.com

Within the restrictions of A1 planning permission, Chaplais can only produce a limited range of dishes on the premises, but the kitchen also acts as a 'laboratory' for his work as a bakery consultant

FACTFILE: Maison Chaplais

What is it? Deli with small kitchen and upstairs café

Where? 52 Andover Road, Cheltenham

Owners: Maurice and Nanette Chaplais

Key equipment: Electrolux six-burner gas range, Smeg combi oven, Williams fridges, Hobart mixer