



SIGNATURE MOVE

Established foodservice equipment supplier Signature FSE represents seven of Europe's most forward-thinking and creative brands, used in kitchens and front-of-house areas belonging to fine-dining restaurants, casual dining chains, premium hotels and top contract caterers. Now customers can see the full product offer up close and personal thanks to the opening of a dedicated showroom. *FEJ* headed to the Garden of England for an exclusive look.

There is no doubt that **Signature FSE owner** Paula Sherlock set herself a challenge when she began searching for a new office and showroom for the business. "I wanted somewhere that would give us the space we needed, but which was also different and a little bit unique in keeping with the ethos of the company," she reveals.

Armed with that brief and a determination to find premises that would support the Kent-based firm's growth strategy, she knew she'd hit the jackpot the moment she stepped inside a former Rochester ammunitions store on the banks of the River Medway.



Packed with history and character, the converted Grade II listed catenary vault dates back to 1857 and, if you look closely enough, the walls still bear some of the scars of its original use.

It might not sound like your usual setting to display the latest foodservice equipment, but that was exactly the appeal. "It took about six to nine months in planning just to know

whether the building was going to work for us because at that time it was a shell, literally. We spent a lot of time talking with the landlord about getting the right mix of infrastructure in, but we are delighted with it."

The dual-floor arrangement has allowed Signature — which has been operating in the UK market since 2003 — to create two distinct areas for its heavy equipment brands and light equipment brands, something that its previous office didn't permit. Large buffet



SIGNATURE FSE BRANDS

Chasseur

Chasseur is a French brand of enamelled cast-iron cookware manufactured in the foundry and enamelling plants of owner company Invicta. Established since 1924, the cast-iron cookware by Chasseur is ideal for professional chefs thanks to the quality of its material, the traditional and authentic craftsmanship and the wide product range.

**Clifton Food Range**

UK-based Clifton Food Range provides professional chefs with sous vide equipment developed and manufactured by Nickel-Electro, a brand leader in precision temperature-control equipment. Clifton water baths, known for their signature orange handles, have become popular in restaurant group kitchens and with Michelin-starred chefs.

**De Buyer**

De Buyer is a French company created in 1830 and based in the Vosges mountain region. It specialises in the design and manufacture of high-quality cooking,

food preparation equipment, salt and pepper mills, and pastry utensils for professional chefs. De Buyer believes that professional chefs have different needs of materials and products, based on their cuisine speciality, their cooking techniques or their menu.

**Gastros Switzerland**

Gastros Switzerland is a specialist in buffet induction hobs. Its products, using InductWarm technology, are perfect for front-of-house operations where space is at a premium and flexibility is required. Tabletop and built-in models are designed to be customer-facing, hence the sleek design as well as being very practical for end-users. The undercounter model keeps food warm with invisible technology.

**Livecookintable**

Livecookintable, by German company MEC2 GmbH, has developed a range of modular and portable cooking furniture, based on constant



needs from chefs and caterers wanting to have a customised and integral set-up for their events, buffet area, tastings or fairs. This concept is suitable for indoor and outdoor use and is ideal for hotels, catering, stadia and cooking classes.

Pinti Inox

Pinti Inox is a family-run company from northern Italy, in an area famous for metal working. A leading manufacturer of stainless steel products since 1929, the Sarezzo-based company specialises in high-quality cutlery, presentation and buffet equipment.

**Venta**

Büchin Design is a Berlin-based company and the creator of Venta, a modular buffet system ideal for restaurants and hotels in need of innovative buffet display equipment. All the Venta tables have a very pure and minimalist design. Many four- and five-star hotels across the UK are already using the Venta induction tables for their event or buffet presentations.



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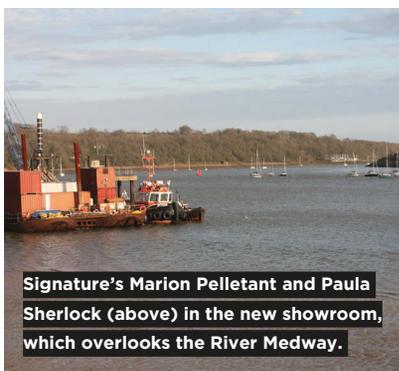
and cooking equipment from German brands Venta and livecookintable, as well as water baths from Clifton Food Range and induction hobs from Gastros, can be found on the ground floor, while French and Italian light equipment brands de Buyer, Chasseur and Pinti Inox occupy the mezzanine area. “I think that if we weren’t able to segment it like that it could be quite

overwhelming,” admits Sherlock. “You have also got to give the right amount of space and presence for each brand because they all have different requirements. What you need for cutlery is completely different for what you need for livecookintable.”

At the former office, Sherlock and her team spent a considerable amount of time on the road visiting customers.

They are, of course, still doing that but the nature of Signature’s product mix means it can now offer real value to visitors that make the trip to Kent.

“The experience of coming here with the mix of the seven brands is quite advantageous and we just couldn’t have done that at the previous premises. It is all about explaining the product and that is so much easier to do when you can touch and feel it rather than having to rely on a PowerPoint presentation. If you look at a brand such as livecookintable, which is a product for front-of-



Signature's Marion Pelletant and Paula Sherlock (above) in the new showroom, which overlooks the River Medway.

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seven partners. Is that because of the importance of staying focused?

“At one point, we did have more and we found it very difficult to manage,” answers Sherlock. “There were just too many things to manage from a channel point of view. Every year there are new products, new prices and new things to talk about — when you times that by 12 it becomes massive. Even multiplying it by seven is enough!

“You can keep adding, but I think you end up watering down what you can do for each brand when you have a responsibility to the brand to promote them in the way that they want to be promoted. You have also got to think about the ethos of each brand. What the Buyer wants is fundamentally different to what Chasseur or Pinti wants.”

Sherlock describes Signature's business as an agent model, similar to the one commonly used in the US market. Put simply, Signature is paid to influence, facilitate and support sales, but it does not make any margin on the transaction because it doesn't stock the products or get involved in their delivery as this is handled by the brands and distribution channel.

That has some major benefits, says Sherlock. “What we provide is the representation from a sales point of view, be it for a distributor that needs

assistance or training and a UK point of contact for a project or an end-user such as a new restaurant or caterer.

“Each brand has got its own showroom and demonstration facilities, but they could be in France, Germany, Italy or Switzerland. I doubt we'd get people to Zurich, but we can get them to Kent, so it is important from that point of view. Working as the manufacturers' agent makes us a little bit different to a wholesaler — it means we can be completely focused on sales and marketing and not on the invoicing and delivery of the product.”

Signature's corporate strapline is 'Listen. Advise. Support.' and that feeds right the way through to the way it engages with operators. By having the right mixture of brands, Signature is able to demonstrate different solutions, provide options and support the migration from more traditional technologies to newer equipment that its partners are renowned for.

With all of Signature's brands competing at the premium end of the market, the company faces severe competition from cheaper alternatives.

But that doesn't faze Sherlock: “It is like anything you buy, there is always something less expensive on the market but there is also a reason why the more expensive thing is better. It is about explaining why it is better. From a chefs' point of view, it might save time getting the dish from cooking to the pass. If it can save time in a busy kitchen environment, and perhaps even save money as well, you can very quickly prove that an ROI can be achieved and price no longer becomes the predominant discussion.”

Some people are always going to buy the less expensive option because it is all their budget allows, but if you have a choice and you are running a premium catering establishment, you generally want the product to look right, work seamlessly and offer longevity.

“We all live in a disposable world, but actually we all still value things that last a long time as well. And as long as they are looked after they will last a long time,” concludes Sherlock. **F&B**

house cooking purposes, you can demonstrate it exactly as it is going to be used. The brands are also delighted with that development and to have a permanent presence in the UK.”

The location, just 20 minutes from London by high-speed train or road via the M25 and A2, makes it incredibly accessible. Sherlock says those who have visited so far have ended up spending twice the amount of time they thought they would.

“Most have come thinking they are going to be here for an hour and have actually been quite happy to stay for two, two-and-a-half hours, because they have realised there is a lot to see — more than they thought because they were perhaps just coming for one brand but end up seeing how another brand could add to their project. One brand does definitely lead onto other brands, particularly as we are talking about premium quality products.”

Suppliers can get notoriously obsessed with adding new brands to their portfolio and growing the overall number, but Signature appears to be happy with its collection of