

Successful Applicant: Cotto

Awarded £10,000 for flooring, plastering, bathrooms, boiler, and kitchen equipment



Interview with our Grant Advisor, Crover:
crover@bristol.gov.uk

Tell me about yourselves and Cotto.

We're Josie Harvey (she/her), Ben Harvey (he/him) and Dom Borel (he/him). Cotto is the fifth establishment in our group of Italian restaurants and bars in Bristol, located at 31 St Stephen's Street, BS1 1JX.

There was a vacant unit between our restaurant Pasta Ripiena and our wine bar La Sorella. This provided a great opportunity to improve our offering in the city centre. We've added rustic Italian small plates to our wine bar to create Cotto, a much more inviting place.

Taking on the new unit was a lifesaver for the bar, which felt like a half-finished project. Adding the kitchen element will help keep it profitable in the long-term.

Lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic gave us lots of time to plan. We turned our attention to expanding our offering and focusing on bringing our community projects into our core business model.

'we have a loyal following on social media and use our presence to help charities reach new audiences'

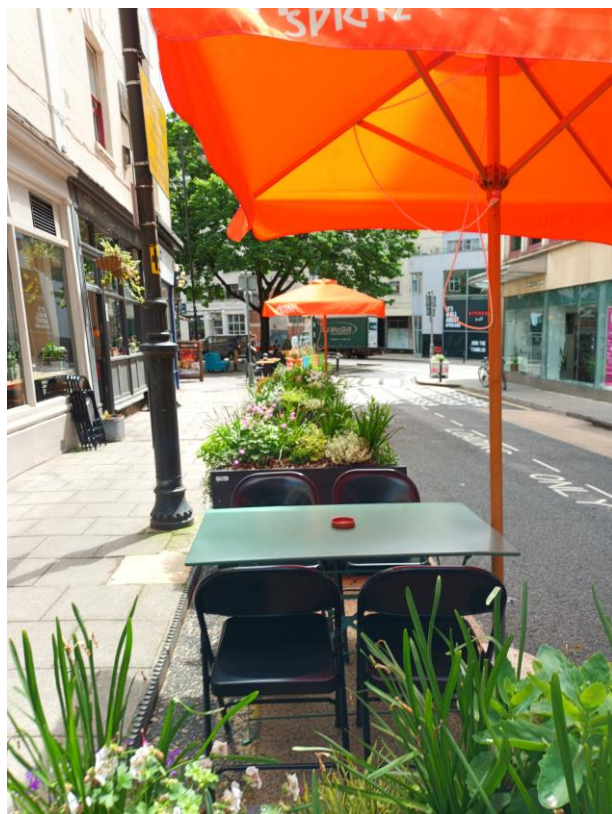
Tell me more about your community Projects.

Over the years we've worked with a lot of charities. We're now tying all of our activity into one programme, Cotto Community Contribution, to make this easier to manage.

We display 'CCC' against some items on our menu. 50p from each sale goes into our charity pot. Currently we're working with The Square Food Foundation, Caring in Bristol, Pride Without Borders, The Mazi Project, and Team Canteen. We help these charities with our skills and expertise as well as with money. Square Food Foundation for example run a lot of catering events but they don't have a chef, so our chefs help them run events.

We also ran a scheme called 'Cheers Drive' based in a local Bristol homeless shelter. We spent six months cooking meals for them during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

We have a loyal following on social media and use our presence to help charities reach new audiences, as well as showing our customers who we work with and why.



How important is sustainability to your business?

We're currently setting the formal sustainability commitments across our businesses.

Since we promote our commitments to our customers, it's important that we believe in them as company directors. Shaping our growing sustainability journey is really exciting! It's informing a better overall business model than we've had before.

We use local suppliers wherever possible. We buy our herbs and salad ingredients from a local community project, BS13. This supports their volunteers to keep growing at allotments in Hartcliffe. They deliver everything to us on bikes. We also use recyclable vegware as much as possible.

We're currently looking into buying fully electric cars which makes financial sense now that congestion charges are being brought into Bristol. In the past sometimes it felt like trying to help the environment lowered profits too much. It's great that these sort of decisions now make good business sense. Whatever we do has to be about keeping the business viable.



'We're excited to shape our sustainability journey. It's informing a better overall business model...'



As ethical employers, how do you look after your employees?

First and foremost we're a family business. Our philosophy has centred on that since we started our first business, Pasta Loco six years ago. We've grown rapidly since then and now have about 70 employees across our group of businesses.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started in March 2020 we've found that our staff need more of a focus on support for their mental health. We're in an industry where people work long hours.

Some of our team really struggled with the change of pace following lockdowns in returning to working the hospitality standard of 65-70 hours per week. We made a commitment to all of our staff that full time contracts average 40 hours per week and even increased their salaries so they receive more now than they did when they worked longer hours.

We've taken on an HR providers platform giving our employees access to personal support like counselling as well as courses for professional development.

Post-pandemic we've looked at ways to make back the money we lost but there's no point in doing that if the team is struggling with work-life balance in a new world. Our margins have gotten tighter but looking after our team and keeping them happy saves us money in the long-term since we don't have to re-recruit.

'We're a family business. Our philosophy has centred on that since we started.'



Tell me about expanding a business during a pandemic.

When everything shut down in March 2020 we donated all of our fresh stock to local charities and started thinking how to best make use of our time.

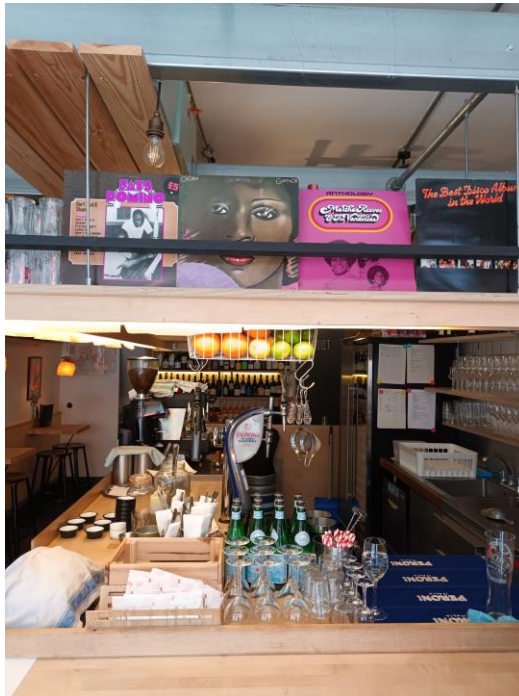
We developed a new restaurant, Pizza Bianchi which we ran as a pop-up between lockdowns. This was really successful. We also did really well with takeaways from all of our restaurants and worked hard to keep our brand alive and stay present during a time of silence.

Delivering to our loyal customers on a weekly basis kept them in love with our products and kept our staff busy and fully paid. We weren't sure at first how we could keep paying everyone a full wage so this went really well.

Sometimes you've got to be brave in business and trust you've built the right team to step up when things get tough. This wasn't a case of 'speculate to accumulate', we had to speculate to survive!

Managing 70 staff sounds daunting but we've got to that point now where we have a great pool of talent. We can move people around easily and try new things. The more restaurants we open the easier it gets because we can cover everything. If we hadn't have expanded during covid we wouldn't have had the cover to manage covid related sick leave.

'You've got to be brave in business and trust you've built the right team to step up when things get tough.'



What's been the biggest challenge in your disruptive approach?

Making money!

We're blessed that we're able to support the wider community, but if we're not making money it's not sustainable and we want to be able to keep doing good for years to come.

Prices are rising across the board for ingredients, energy, waste management, petrol etc. We have constant conversations on how we can increase our margins whilst not raising our prices too much. People are blown away by the quality of our food for the price we offer but we know some customers couldn't afford to pay more. We don't want to prevent anyone, on any budget from being a repeat customer.



How does Cotto make Bristol a better place to live for our residents?

What we bring to the hospitality scene is really significant in terms of the quality of our food and service. Our work with community projects is at the core of the business as we've mentioned, and we're able to offer jobs and a leg up in to loads of young people. We're currently putting one of our chefs through college. It's great to help people on their career path.

We collaborate with lots of other hospitality businesses to raise money for charities and community projects. When you've built the presence we have you can shine a light on important areas and inspire other people to get involved in a bigger cause.

How have you diversified St Stephen's Street and the city centre?

Cotto brings a different take on Italian Food.

We follow the slow food philosophy which was developed in Turin, Italy. This is all about using high quality, locally sourced ingredients, and cooking in traditional ways that bring out the best flavours.

We have a terrace out the front that's really added some colour and excitement to the street for both residents and tourists looking to eat.

There wasn't any al fresco dining here before. We get loads of customers who are staying in hotels who give us fantastic compliments. We bring something different to Bristol.



'When you've built the presence we have, you can... inspire other people to get involved in a bigger cause.'

Visit Cotto

31 St. Stephen's Street, BS1 1JX

[Website](#) | [Book a table](#) 

How has this funding helped you to trade and achieve your goals?

It gave us the confidence to launch Cotto. Without it we would have had to sacrifice our high-quality kitchen equipment and the decorating standards. It's alleviated the pressure and made it easier to sleep at night!