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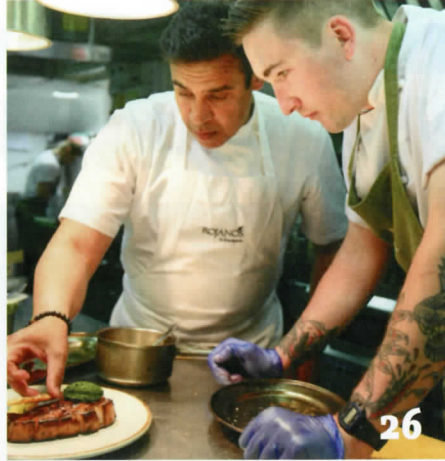
Meet Harry Handelsman and the team behind new hotel the Stratford, bringing US loft-style living to east London

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Sky's the limit

With a mix of luxury short-stay bedrooms and opulent long-stay lofts all in one huge 42-storey package, Harry Handelsman is bringing a taste of Manhattan to east London with the Stratford hotel. Fiona Sims checks in

It's one of the most talked about new hotel openings in London. A new era of hotel living, mixing short-term hotel guests and long-term Londoners under one roof, says the boss. Yet the 250-room business (including the terrace) is strangely low on customers on a Thursday evening in mid-summer, just a month after opening.

To be fair, the Stratford is still a bit of a building site. And its much hoped-for destination restaurant, Allegre, with ex-Chilterns House chef Patrick Powell at the helm, is not opening until early September. Plus, the Stratford Brasserie, as it's called, is situated in one of those cleverly designed open-plan spaces, where the bar rolls into the lobby and the barista flows into the outside terrace – a fluid space of music, art and chatter, as it were, feels empty. And as the name suggests, it's located in Stratford – yes, east London.

Hang a left at Canary Wharf and keep on driving – about four miles north. Or be public transport, it's bang opposite Stratford International, with Westfield Stratford City one of the largest shopping centres in the country, begging much of the land rent to a surprising choice of location for a luxury hotel, you might think – all 42 storeys of it.

Occupying the first six floors is the Stratford, a 145-bedroom luxury hotel. The seventh floor is dedicated to Allegre, while guests checking in for a week or more will head to the Stratford Lofts, a collection of 240 single- and double-bright loft apartments, paying homage to the long-stay hotels of 1970s New York.

Man with the Midas touch

It all starts to make sense when you find out that Harry Handelsman is behind it – he of the celebrity magnet Chilterns House and the magnificent transformation of the St Pancras Renaissance London hotel.

"What I've done over the past 28 years is go to destinations that are under the radar," declares Handelsman. "To give people a sense of excitement, a sense of adventure. And if I do it with style, then people will follow."

He appears to have the Midas touch when it comes to regenerating London's forgotten postcodes. Handelsman was born in Germany and raised in France and Belgium, but it was after moving to New York – and more specifically the SoHo district – that he had the idea to start the Manhattan Loft Corporation, bringing his loft-style living concept to the UK when he moved to London in the late 1980s.

The decline in the property market in the early 1990s saw a glut of old industrial buildings in unrelatable parts of town, so why demand Handelsman with a bundle of cash and a regeneration plan. Starting with Summers Street Lofts in Clerkenwell back in 1992, he has spruced his gold-dust-on-business such as Finsbury Riverside, West India Quay, King's Cross – and now Stratford. So the slow start mustn't matter.

"In some ways, I'm slightly prejudiced by it," he says.

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founder and chief executive
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Phone numbers: 020 7881 + • Content team Editor Chris Gamm + 4803 chris.gamm@thecaterer.com • **Deputy editor** James Stagg + 4811 james.stagg@thecaterer.com • **Associate editor** Janet Harmer + 4814 janet.harmer@thecaterer.com • **News editor** Emma Lake + 4807 emma.lake@thecaterer.com • **Products and suppliers editor** Lisa Jenkins + 4816 lisa.jenkins@thecaterer.com • **Senior reporter** Katherine Price katherine.price@thecaterer.com + 4812 • **Reporter** Vincent Wood vincent.wood@thecaterer.com + 4808 • **If you have a news story, contact:** news@thecaterer.com • **Production Production and art editor** Chris Russell • **Deputy production editor** Kirsty Utting • **Sub editor** Lauren Bowes • **Multimedia production executive** David Regis • **www.thecaterer.com Digital production editor** Katherine Alano + 4804 • **The Caterer events Events manager** Martha Allardyce + 4828 • **Other contacts Marketing manager** Meredith Pistulka + 4829 **Marketing executive** Sam O'Connor + 4876 • **Operations manager** Lisa Gould + 4802 • **To place a display advert, contact:** + 4817 or email advertising@thecaterer.com • **Head of sales** Rob Adam • **Account managers** Michael Murray + 4809 • Adam Skinner + 4824 • Cheryl Townsend + 4822 • **Recruitment sales manager** Tanya Read 4872 • **To place a job advert, email** jobs@thecaterer.com • **To place a property, classified or The Caterer Directory advert, contact** advertising@thecaterer.com • **Managing director** Stuart Parish • **Chief executive officer** Duncan Horton • **Chairman** Clive Jacobs

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Sky's the limit

With a mix of luxury short-stay bedrooms and opulent long-stay lofts all in one huge 42-storey package, Harry Handelsman is bringing a taste of Manhattan to east London with the Stratford hotel. *Fiona Sims* checks in

It's one of the most talked-about new hotel openings in London. A new era of hotel living, uniting short-term hotel guests and long-term Londoners under one roof, says the blurb. Yet the 170-seat brasserie (including the terrace) is strangely low on customers on a Thursday evening in mid-summer, just a month after opening.

To be fair, the Stratford is still a bit of a building site. And its much-hyped destination restaurant, Allegra, with ex-Chiltern Firehouse chef Patrick Powell at the helm, is not opening until early September. Plus, the Stratford Brasserie, as it's called, is situated in one of those cleverly designed open-plan spaces, where the bar rolls into the lobby and the brasserie flows into the outside terrace – a fluid space of music, art and chatter, so it never feels empty. And as the name suggests, it's located in Stratford – yes, east London.

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transport, it's bang opposite Stratford International, with Westfield Stratford City, one of the largest shopping centres in the country, hogging much of the land next to it. A surprising choice of location for a luxury hotel, you might think – all 42 storeys of it.

Occupying the first six floors is the Stratford, a 145-bedroom luxury hotel. The seventh floor is dedicated to Allegra, while guests checking in for a week or more will head to the Stratford Lofts, a collection of 248 single- and double-height loft apartments, paying homage to the long-stay hotels of 1950s New York.

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The decline in the property market in the early 1990s saw a glut of old industrial buildings in unfashionable parts of town, so step forward Handelsman with a bundle of cash and a regeneration plan. Starting with Summers Street Lofts in Clerkenwell back in 1992, he has sprinkled his gold dust on locations such as Fitzrovia, Bankside, West India Quay, King's Cross – and now Stratford. So the slow start must rankle?

"In some ways, I'm slightly perplexed by it,"



Harry Handelsman, founder and chief executive of Manhattan Loft Corporation

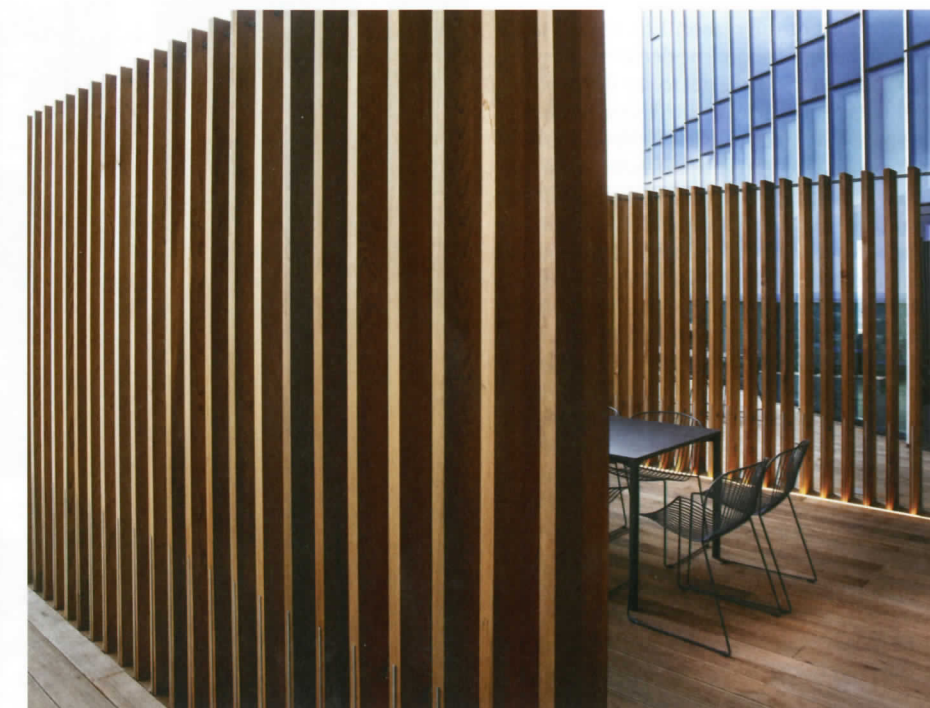
"What I wanted to do was create a building that offers people individuality – if anything, we've given them too much choice"

Harry Handelsman



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From left: Patrick Powell, head chef, Allegra; Ben Harrington, head chef, Stratford Brasserie; Harry Handelsman and Ben Hesketh, food and beverage operations director



◀ says Handelsman, with surprising candour. “I thought that within a month people would be flocking over here to see the beauty of it, and that didn’t quite happen. But it’s Stratford – I get it. For some people it’s probably not yet in their minds – but I think that’s their mistake. So my question is, how do I correct that mistake? How do I change their mindset? The problem is that as you get older, you think you’ve learned a thing or two, but no matter how much you know, things do still go wrong.”

The only way is up

There’s nothing wrong with the building – in fact, it’s a triumph, declare the architect elite. It was designed by SOM, the architects behind the Burj Khalifa and the One World Trade Centre. The paint isn’t yet dry, but it has already received a number of awards, one of them in the Best Tall Building in the 100m-199m category from the Tall and Urban Innovation Conference, of which Handelsman is proud.

The problem is seeing the building in all its glory. Crane your neck upwards from the brasserie entrance, which will be used by most, and you can’t see those daring double cantilevers. The best view, I’m told, is from the East Village, where you glimpse the gardens.

Instead of balconies, SOM has created three Sky Gardens, as they’re called – one on the seventh floor, on the same level as Allegra, which can be used by anyone drinking or dining there, and two residential Sky Gardens on the 25th and 36th floors, for sole use of the long-stay hotel guests, with their cedar cladding, sectioned seating, fire pits, wild flowers and scented raised beds.

“The British are a nation that loves the outdoors. But balconies aren’t enough – I wanted to give something more,” explains Handelsman. “The whole concept behind the Sky Gardens is to create a community – a space to hang out and talk to each other, to play with children, chat to neighbours. It facilitates interaction.”

“What I’ve done over the last 28 years is go to destinations that are under the radar – it gives people a sense of excitement, a sense of adventure”

Harry Handelsman

Those double cantilevers that support the Sky Gardens cost Handelsman around £9m, he happily shares, also pointing out that they reduce his letting space on the prime 36th floor by 50%. “I did it because nobody else would, so it becomes a true privilege. And I can do it because my family trust is the sole investor in this. If I’d had a co-investor I would have had to make

some drastic changes. But my family know I take a more long-term view,” shares Handelsman, who won’t reveal the cost of the project.

Rooms with a view

Harry’s favourite apartment is number 3801 (£2,648 per week). The quirky corner plot is a double-height space with loft-style open-plan living, designed by Space Copenhagen, which designed all the other hotel rooms and apartments. It looks down over the Sky Garden on the 36th floor. “You can really see the metropolis in front of you – the density of Canary Wharf to the left and the City of London beyond. I can even see St Paul’s. And look at all the greenery everywhere,” he says, pointing out Hackney’s Victoria Park.

“I live in a Georgian house overlooking Hyde Park, yet it pales in comparison with what is here – there’s so much more green space. When I wake up here I feel incredibly connected to the city. I see the evolution of

the city. Part of the reason I do what I do is because I love London," he declares.

In number 2803, we get to see the exposed steel trusses on one of the 'transfer floors', the space that holds up the cantilever, cleverly repurposed into a large apartment, complete with astonishing view. "I think the trusses are beautiful – and they fit right into the concept of loft living. I always wanted to introduce an element of loft living into this project. We always wanted to reveal the structure, to keep the spaces as they are," he adds, as we crane our necks upwards to check out the builder's spray-painted arrows deliberately left in place.

"The way you normally build a skyscraper like this is you create repetition. But in this building we have 30 different varieties of apartments. This is totally unusual. What I wanted to do was create a building that offers people individuality – if anything, we've given them too much choice," he grins, revealing that guests are already upgrading themselves to the more distinctive apartments, which start at £961 per week in the studio loft, rising to £5,192 for the two-bed loft.

And talking of art – of which Handelsman is an enthusiastic patron – there is an absence of it on the walls. "It's not for me to tell you what art you should be looking at. There's so much terrible, cheap art in hotels these days, so at this stage we chose not to put any up in the rooms. Instead, we chose to focus on a few key pieces, such as the one in the lobby ['Murmuration' by Paul Cockshedge], and the courtyard sculpture by Petroc Sesti."

In fact, Handelsman's favourite hotel rooms are those that have windows directly onto the courtyard and that mesmerising Sesti sculpture, the sky only visible in the reflection on the glass. Hotel room prices start at £175 per night, rising to £515 for the Manhattan Studio, with current occupancy figures declined to share, but predicted to be 80%-90%.

A golden opportunity

It wasn't the excitement of the Olympics that drew Handelsman to Stratford for this 'vertical community' project, which has been 10 years in the making. "When I saw the space, I said, you know what, this is exciting – how can I make living in a high-rise actually something that is fabulous, that is fun, with a sense of privilege?" he recalls, after venting his frustration on the proliferation of "anonymous skyscrapers" that have popped up all over the capital.

Since then the area has seen a flurry of cultural activity. Already home to the Bartlett School of Architecture, innovative digital hub Here East, and the Zaha Hadid-designed London Stadium and Aquatic Centre, it will be joined by Sadler's Wells, the V&A, the new UCL campus and slick music venue Madison Square Garden's Sphere. "The change is coming," grins Handelsman.

Meanwhile, the focus is on drumming up interest from locals, who will surely be tempted by the reasonable prices in the brasserie (£60-£70 for two), with 110 covers available inside and 60 covers outside and a

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Harry Handelsman

further 95 covers in the bar, terrace and lobby. "The pricing is very competitive and it gives us room to manoeuvre," explains food and beverage operations director Ben Hesketh.

Combine that with Stratford Brasserie head chef Ben Harrington's comfort-inducing twist on the classics (hasselback potatoes smothered in cheese sauce, anyone?), the imminent installation of the new pizza oven on the terrace and a very keenly priced oyster cart and the offering is very attractive.

"We think we have something fresh and

unique in the brasserie. We want it to be accessible to everyone, where locals can drop by to grab a spritzer at the bar, or stay to try one of the dishes on the all-day menu – after breakfast, the kitchen opens at 11am and closes at 10.30pm. We are keenly aware that everyone's schedules are different," says Hesketh.

Harrington also oversees the food in the four events spaces and in the Mezzanine. This is the hotel's seriously swanky lounge bar, complete with DJ decks, visible from the lobby but cut off by thick curtains as night falls. It is headed by affable ex-Westbury Polo bar manager, Elias Yiallouris. The Stratford's general manager, Ash Shaw, also hails from the Westbury.

Says Handelsman: "It is exciting and incredibly challenging, and yes, I do have nights where I think, my God what should I do? But this is what London needs, and London is a city where you can make it happen. There might be some challenges – if I was living in any other country and there was the calamity of Brexit, I would say, where's my suitcase? But this is a city that is determined and can succeed; where people might move away, but they always come back. No other city compares."

Allegra: bringing a sense of excitement to high-rise dining

"It took me just 28 minutes by car to get from the Firehouse to the Stratford last night," says Handelsman, when I asked him whether he thought that crowd would venture this far east, to Allegra. "And look at the River Café – I adore that restaurant and it became a destination in its own right. I see Allegra as the bookend of the River Café," he announces, referring to the Hammersmith icon, now 32 years old.

Here's hoping he's right. Allegra certainly promises a unique destination when it opens on 6 September – in London's most talked-about tower, with interiors by Space Copenhagen (which designed Noma), with a hot chef at the helm. It also offers a bar where guests can enjoy delights such as oysters or charcuterie from its in-house curing room, which can also be munched on the cedar-clad outdoor terrace that spills onto one of the Stratford's three stunning Sky Gardens.

Not that the view from the seventh floor is particularly far-reaching, looking out over the roof of the Westfield shopping centre, train tracks and a multi-storey car-park, with the still-youthful trees of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park fluttering nearby.

But who needs a view when you've got head chef Patrick Powell's food? Powell made a name for himself at Fitzrovia hotspot Chiltern Firehouse, one Handelsman made earlier. He first worked there under Nuno Mendes, but has previously cooked with Anthony Demetre at London's Wild Honey and worked with Dublin's

Patrick Powell



Derry Clarke. "So my cooking is very grounded in the classics," explains Powell.

"The menu at Allegra will be very seasonal, using the best produce I can get my hands on. We will try to balance dishes in terms of flavour profiles, but we will also aim to deliver the unexpected, and try not to make you feel too full at the end of it," he promises, revealing that he will be using some Asian seasoning techniques, too, thanks to his earlier travels in the region.

Dishes will include starters such as honeymoon melon, smoked tomato, basil and kombu, or mackerel tartare, salted cucumber, buttermilk and apple. Mains are suckling pig, swede cake, peanut, mustard fruit and sage, or confit sea trout, soft herbs, pickled radish and smoked broth. There will be desserts such as elderflower panna cotta, raspberry, fennel and lemon ice.

Much of the produce will be grown on Allegra's farm in Kent, in which Handelsman has invested. "The farm will give us the edge. And with Brexit looming, it will be the most cost-effective way for us to buy vegetables," explains Powell, who has been busy using what has been picked so far. "We've been pickling, fermenting and preserving like crazy," he grins.

It's a big restaurant, with 80 covers in the main room plus 25 covers at the bar and a further 50 covers on the terrace, which will have a separate menu, and where there will be a wood-burning grill, sending delicious wafts up to the floors above. "We want people staying here to feel like it's their restaurant – even if we are fully booked, we will find them a seat," promises Powell, who has a 15-strong brigade behind him.

"Everywhere you look you will see something different – even on the way to the toilet," he says. "I think it will be the most beautiful dining space in London – I want to bring that sense of excitement back into dining again," he declares.

