

Happiness is a warm saké

Simon Woodroffe is not only the king prawn of sushi but a dab hand at management speak. Before he addresses the IPR Conference this month, **Peter Jackson** sought him out on the mean streets of Soho



IT'S A wet early morning in Poland Street. Behind the barred windows of the first restaurant in the YO! Sushi chain the conveyor belt is still, the drink dispensing robots are silent and no one is pressing the warm saké dispenser in the YO! Below bar.

But up in the slightly scruffy office that is currently the YO! Company's HQ (though soon to be replaced by a more up-market version in Clerkenwell) Simon Woodroffe, founder and CEO of the burgeoning YO! Empire, is bright as a button and already seizing the day. Indeed, *carpe diem* could well be his motto, if it wasn't yet another of those piscine puns which a meeting with the king of sushi inevitably brings bubbling to the surface.

Word plays on YO! (*Stupid name, brilliant concept. A.A.Gill*) are not needed. Simon and his team have already cornered the market. In addition to the original YO! Sushi restaurants and YO! Below bars there's YO! You Kids (range of children's food and merchandise), YO! to Wear, YO! Events, Drink YO! self silly (self-serve beer on tap), YO! to Blow (smoke-extracting ashtrays), YO! to Glow lighters and matches and the innovative home

delivery service YO! to GO with its fleet of electric Go-peds.

Forcing back the vision of two adjacent company premises (YO! YO!) I ask about the original thought that brought this extraordinary concept into being.

"Well, I'd reached the age of 40 in the music and TV business and had some of the biggest names in pop music as my clients. Although it might have seemed to others that I had done OK, inside I felt frustrated that I'd never reached my potential. I wanted to be rich and famous and successful and I felt my time was ticking away.

"I started writing down ideas to develop and talking about them and one day a Japanese acquaintance said: 'What you should do Simon, is a conveyor belt sushi bar with girls in black PVC mini skirts.' We never did the mini skirts, but those four words 'conveyor belt sushi bar' were the catalyst that helped me step into the insecurity of the next few years."

Now there is a YO! Sushi at the Millennium Dome, at South London's Bluewater shopping complex (the world's largest conveyor belt sushi bar), in Selfridges shop window, and, with Clerkenwell opening this month, five

other London sites besides the Poland Street pioneer. Sites in Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow will follow next year and plans are already in train for the expansion into Australia and the United States where Simon Woodroffe first sampled the delights of this Eastern delicacy. The YO! concept is on a roll.

"Of course it's not just about sushi," he says, "although that's how the whole thing started. YO! is really a concept; it's about being young at heart, it's about innovation, in the case of the sushi bars and our YOTEL! Idea, it's about presenting old things in a new style. It's also about being honest with your customers, about being open and transparent."

And does marketing and public relations have a part to play in this concept and this success?

"When I started I resisted the urge to come up with a basic product and put all my efforts into a marketing plan to make it work. Instead, we have put all our efforts into designing the product – just like James Dyson. If it's good enough it will sell itself." And so far the ideas and the products have sold themselves well, enough to bring Simon Woodroffe the awards of Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year 1999 and UK Group Restaurateur

