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E Power Players

Sam | Am

SBE's Sam Nazarian is taking over Hollywood, one hot spot at a time.  
BY SCOTT HUVER

**RESTAURATEUR, HOTELIER, REAL ESTATE** mogul, nightclub czar, filmmaker, entrepreneur—all are apt descriptions of Sam Nazarian. But as the mover and shaker responsible for many of Los Angeles' hottest luxury-lifestyle venues, he might most aptly be summed up as "host with the most."

The founder and CEO of SBE Entertainment Group, Nazarian decided at an early age to break away from his family's manufacturing and telecommunications businesses. "I hit the ground running with real estate, which backed me into the whole cross-platform of entertainment," he says. Studying such elite destinations as the One and Only resorts and the boutique hotels of André Balazs and Ian Schrager, Nazarian zeroed in on the kind of locale and experience he found lacking in LA.

"I started seeing the integration and the need for energy within a space," he explains. "How design and the food-and-beverage picture took a fundamental role in a property, whether it's condos or office buildings." He launched SBE in 2002, slamming out-of-the-ballpark home runs with Brentwood's Katsuya restaurant (designed by regular collaborator Philippe Starck) and Santa Monica's Viceroy hotel.

By his mid-twenties, Nazarian had become LA's king of clubs, with an assortment of nightspots—Hyde, Area, Privilege, and the Lobby among them—that instantly attracted Hollywood's A-list. But famous faces alone aren't the source of his clubs' success. "People in LA appreciate design," he stresses. "They appreciate cutting-edge service. It's not just about celebrities in the room."

One critical alliance for Nazarian was a partnership with highly regarded club promoter Brent Bolthouse, who made his reputation building showbiz player-friendly evenings at various hot spots. Nazarian had seen the inherent problem firsthand during his own forays into clubland: "Somebody would come in and spend \$3,000 to \$4,000 one evening and come back the next to find a different promoter, and they wouldn't know who he was. He felt betrayed."



SBE's Katsuya Brentwood.



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Teaming with Bolthouse to conceptualize, develop, and brand each new property, Nazarian created a consistent experience for clubhoppers. "We're not taking old warehouses in Hollywood and converting them into the nightclub of the month," he says. "So [Bolthouse] doesn't have to inherit a decrepit property and try to put lipstick on the pig. Now he's involved in the creation of it." The partnership allows SBE to "manage the experience from valet to valet" every night of the week. "We already know you're coming—and we already know what you like."

Nazarian is now going after an even wider—and notoriously mercurial—audience: moviegoers. His indie production company, Element Films, has produced well-received movies like the recent thriller *Mr. Brooks*.

Nazarian admits that his position as a hospitality mogul serves him well in his role of movie producer. "I had a great relationship with Dane Cook," he says. "We put him in his first movie,

*Waiting*. But I didn't know Demi Moore or Kevin Costner that well. [In those cases it comes down to whether] they love the script and it works for them, and fits within our budget. There hasn't been a lot of, 'I know Leo DiCaprio. Let's make a movie around him.'

"The one consistent thread was to elevate the level of expectation, whether it's Hyde as a lounge, our new hotel brand SLS [on La Cienega], a new gaming property in Las Vegas, our hotel that's opening in 2009 in South Beach, Florida, or even the way we make movies. It's giving the customer a surprise, and not just from a design element or a trendiness element."

And as his entertainment empire expands beyond the boundaries of LA, Nazarian pledges that the city he loves will remain his own personal capital. "I'm the self-imposed ambassador of Los Angeles," he explains. "I've given myself that title because everywhere I go, all I do is talk about Los Angeles being the best place in the world to live. If I have any legacy, it's really pushing that envelope."