Entrepreneur
EXECUTIVE MIDDLE EAST
LIFESTYLE LEGENDS

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CHADI FARHAT / SBE
CHRISTOPH HOFFMAN / 25HOURS
EVGENY KUZIN / KITCH-IN
FERIT ŞAHENK / D.REAM INTERNATIONAL
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FLAVIO BRIATORE / MILLIONAIRE
GAURAV BHUSHAN / ACCOR
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JÉRÉMIE TRIGANO / MAMA SHELTER
JOELLE MARDINIAN / MAISON DE JOELLE
LOUIS ABI ABBOD / ACCOR
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As a special edition of Entrepreneur Middle East, Entrepreneur Executive is a showcase of the individuals and brands that are revolutionizing the region’s lifestyle sector. From high-end hospitality to luxury retail, Entrepreneur Executive is a celebration of the various facets that make up the modern entrepreneur’s lifestyle.

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n November 2020, French hospitality giant Accor announced that it had entered a new partnership with Ennismore, an innovative, independent operator, in order to form the world’s leading lifestyle entity, bringing together two of the sector’s biggest players in a game-changing move, which would set the tone for a myriad of exceptional, guest-centric experiences under 12 world-class brands.

Owner of The Hoxton and Gleneagles, Ennismore’s merger with Accor, the group behind lifestyle brands including Mondrian, SO/, Hyde, Mama Shelter, 25hours, 21c Museum Hotels, TRIB3, JOE&JOR, and more, will result in a combined entity which will keep the Ennismore name.

Sharan Pasricha, founder and CEO of Ennismore, and Gaurav Bhushan, CEO of Accor Lifestyle, will cooperatively lead the new lifestyle entity, of which Accor will own two-thirds and Pasricha one-third. The company will base its headquarters in London. “The essence of this partnership is rooted in benefitting from the scale, size, distribution, network and reach of Europe’s largest hotel company, Accor, and the independence, autonomy, authenticity, storytelling, and creativity of Ennismore,” says Pasricha.

The young serial entrepreneur founded the business in 2011, and he oversees the overall strategy of Ennismore and its brands. Named as one of Conde’ Nast Traveller’s “50 People Changing the Way We Travel,” Pasricha leads a team of over 150 employees in his London and New York offices, and 2,900 across his hotels and restaurants. “The merger is about taking brands and ensuring that they live on in countries around the world, but also that they are purposeful, have meaning, depth and authenticity,” he continues. “A compelling culmination, it allows them to flourish under the independent, autonomy structure we created, but also benefit from the global reach and scale of Accor around the world.”

The combined entity, at its inception, will comprise 12 brands with 73 hotels in operation with a committed pipeline of more than 110 hotels. Another 70 hotels, and over 150 destination restaurants and bars, are also under active discussion.

Co-CEO Bhushan, who embarked on his career journey at Accor in Australia, has held various positions in operations and finance, followed by hotel development in the Asia-Pacific region. He was appointed Global Chief Development Officer of Accor in 2015, where he was responsible for the group’s network development worldwide, as well as M&A and Strategic Partnerships.

Under his leadership, Accor’s footprint experienced an unprecedented expansion with the opening of one hotel a day on average. Bhushan is a member of the group’s Executive Committee, and he is also currently a board member of Accor Invest, 25Hours, Banyan Tree, Rinas, and she.

“It has been fortunate enough to be a part of this journey from the beginning,” says Bhushan. “With only two hotels in 2017, we began studying this space quite vigorously. Our main focus has always been analyzing customers’ behaviour, trying to understand, very carefully, the choices they consistently make. Evidently, there had been a shift from a functional approach, to more experiential one. Hence, our focus was then directed towards building experience-led brands with that notion at the core.”

For Bhushan, the pursuit of fulfilling experiences drives today’s guest, even if it comes at a higher price bracket. “People will travel very far just so they can savour the right stay. Even if you don’t have the best location in town, it’s all about crafting that for them.”

It was precisely that which had prompted Accor, the largest hospitality company in Europe and the sixth largest worldwide, to aim for a more balanced portfolio. “The group has done an amazing job with the midscale and economy segments, with ever-popular brands such as Novotel, ibis and more. However, as we further build our portfolio and look at where the business world is headed, we’re seeking a stronger presence in the luxury and lifestyle domains,” he explains. “This partnership enables Accor to be at the forefront of lifestyle hospitality. With it, the group reinforces its offering in one of the fastest-growing segments of the industry. Accor’s Lifestyle operations represent five per cent of Accor’s fees, but over 25% of pipeline fees. It will continue to be an important piece of the puzzle over the next ten to 20 years, as we consistently maintain this approach to business.”

Yigit Sezgin, Chief Commercial Officer at Accor, also asserts that the merger will accelerate market penetration for the group. “I’m very excited to be a part of this organization and its developments, especially with our latest announcement regarding Ennismore,” he says. “Lifestyle will undoubtedly be the ‘name of the game’ in the hospitality industry for years to come, and Ennismore will be a game changer for Accor. We’re very excited to bring these fantastic and fun concepts into the region, as we aim to become the LVMH platform in this field through strong partnerships in food and beverage concepts and lifestyle brands, which will aid us in penetrating this dynamic market at a faster rate.”
This is the sentiment that is echoed by Louis Abi Abboud, Vice President, Development - Middle East, at Accor when asked to explain his enterprise’s keen interest in the lifestyle domain at this point in time. “The industry is shifting towards lifestyle,” he says. “Guests these days are looking for brands with purpose, offering a curated and elevated guest experience, with bespoke unique designs, powered by solid destination restaurants and bars that are deeply rooted in local communities. If we are incapable of shifting our offering to meet guest needs, we will no longer be relevant in the market. In short, lifestyle is at the core of Accor’s future growth strategy, because this is what both investors and customers are asking for.”

Abi Abboud reveals that Ennismore and Accor’s individual lifestyle brands will remain “forcefully independent,” and that they will operate autonomously in terms of management, creative, design, etc. Oultiers to the industry may think that this proposition might be hard for Accor to actually implement, but he points out that his enterprise has already proved itself in this aspect. “Accor has showcased over the past few years its ability to work and retain some of the most entrepreneurial/creative minds of our industry, from Christoph Hoffman and Alan Faena to the Trigano. While being a massive multinational, we have managed to allow these individuals to remain fiercely creative, while offering them a global platform to shine on. This is all due to an entrepreneurial spirit and culture triggered down from our leadership at Accor.” Partnerships like these are also not new to Accor, Abi Abboud adds. “In 2014, Accor started acquiring some of the industry’s most innovative and quirky hotels brands;” he recalls. “We started in 2014 with Mama Shelter, followed by 25hours, then the SBE portfolio, TRIBE, and recently, the crown jewel collaboration with Faena. Regionally, we managed to sign most of these brands instantly post acquisition. The Mondrian in Doha is open, and we’re opening SLS Dubai, 25hours Dubai, and Mama Shelter Dubai and Bahrain this year.”

“We’re planning to shortly announce a Faena in Dubai, an SLS in KSA, and many more. The Ennismore JV will boost our growth by giving us even more credibility in this field.”

Both Bhushan and Pasricha also believe in the importance of adapting to local markets. “We have an interesting mix of brands, some of which have originated in the US, and others in Europe. There’s no question that you have to be sensitive to the local market; our greatest opportunity to do that is through F&B – cuisine. However, while guests may be looking for an international hotel, they still seek one that exudes brand values,” says Bhushan. “For example, the SLS in Dubai will be a beautiful luxury lifestyle hotel, with a positioning that is similar to that we had in Miami or The Bahamas, but with an adapted F&B and entertainment offering to suit the local market,” he adds. “Sharan has a lot of experience, and we have a fantastic team in the Middle East led by CEO India, Middle East, Africa, and Turkey, Mark Willis, and Chief Commercial Officer of Accor, Yogit Seogin, who understand the market very well. We’re also exploring partnerships with the best operators in F&B and entertainment. I’m confident that when it comes with brands, teams and partnerships, we’ll come up with a world-class product that’s nothing short of extraordinary.”

For his part, Willis is clearly excited about the impact Ennismore can have on Accor’s operations in India, Middle East, Africa, and Turkey. “Setting up Ennismore with a focus on lifestyle as its own segment emphasises the importance of this market for Accor,” Willis notes. “Having a lifestyle division with its own dedicated team ensures that focus is given to the brands in regard to expansion and property openings.”

While Ennismore will be having its own team led by Pasricha and Bhushan, Willis says he and his team will also be throwing their weight behind the new venture. “Of course, we will support all Ennismore activities in our region, whether full team, or its own dedicated team, ensuring that we’re extremely committed to making sure Ennismore is a success, not only in our region, but also globally.”

Willis is also hopeful about more of such mergers happening in the future, especially for an industry that’s still recovering from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic that struck in 2020. “I do believe we will see more partnerships taking place in the future in the travel and hospitality industry,” he says. “The last year has really shown us how working together strengthens the entire industry.”

Speaking with respect to the MEA specifically, Willis believes such collaborations will also prove enticing to patrons in the region, with them able to look forward to unique properties, which will bring a complete new look and feel to the hospitality landscape. “We want to ensure that the brands stay true to their DNA, with some local influence, which relates to their location. With brands such as Faena, SLS, 25 Hours, guests can expect to see the unique propositions which stand out in terms of look, feel and service provided to them.”

And what would venturing into new markets while maintaining brand essence require? Pasricha explains: “We enter every market with a great deal of confidence in our product, but with equal humility coming into every city. The best part of my job is to meet people, talk to them about what we’re trying to do and make it very relevant to the type of guest and cultural intracacies.”

“Nothing we do is copy and paste; in fact, at times, I feel like we need more standardization – to make our lives easier, in the least. However, by no stretch of the imagination would that ever be the case.” Pasricha describes every product, experience, food and beverage outlet, and service market delivery under Ennismore as locally adapted, which he sees as the best part of the company’s journey. “You’re the incredible destination that it is; that often means transporting people outside their environment, and into our world. It’s fun to transfer this to the exciting Middle East market.”

Bhushan agrees; with his experience spanning over a decade in the market, he recounts how he had witnessed growth in the Middle East, and especially Dubai as the Emirate evolved into the incredible destination that it is today. “We have a massive-scale trajectory of opportunity in this global city; I’m super excited about our prospects here.”

Pasricha highlights how following local guidelines in cities like Dubai has been crucial throughout Ennismore’s journey, and how it will continue to play a major role. One of the elements of creating localized experiences, digitization, had been further highlighted during the pandemic. “We’re always trying to stay one step ahead. A lot of customers directly engage with our channels; we get a disproportionate amount of business off that, and that’s how many of our F&B outlets have become destinations in their own right, as opposed to just being a part of a property – it’s a good indicator of how localized we are.”

THE ESSENCE OF THIS PARTNERSHIP IS ROOTED IN BENEFITTING FROM THE SCALE, SIZE, DISTRIBUTION, NETWORK AND REACH OF EUROPE’S LARGEST HOTEL COMPANY, ACCOR.”
Looking back at a time when talks of the merger began to flourish, an active dialogue and a commitment to creating purpose-driven brands fueled Pasricha’s discussions with Bhushan and Accor CEO Sebastien Bazin. The entrepreneur, who had spent most of his career building brands and telling stories that underline authenticity, believed that Accor had been adopting this exact approach with its acquisitions. “If you allow these brands to grow, while they are still under their founders’ leadership, but within a structure that’s autonomous — it generates a powerful recipe for building this business at scale — and that is something that hasn’t been done before.”

While most groups tend to form lifestyle divisions within larger companies, Pasricha remarks, the Paris-based group’s leadership had understood the importance of an independent vehicle — one that was based on creativity and exceptional F&B programming. “That really enables us to ensure that every brand we have has a mission, a purpose, a reason for being,” he says. “That, coupled with the might of Accor’s distribution and global development team and network around the world, is what makes this the most compelling lifestyle partnership that this industry has seen in decades.”

To form the new company, Accor will pay $300 million for the remaining 50% of the Group and take full ownership of the companies it acquired a 50% stake in late 2018. It includes the Mondrian, SLS and Hyde, as well as F&B brands Cleo and Carna by Dario Cecchini. These brands will be at the center of the global lifestyle platform. Accor also plans to buy out its partners in Mama Shelter and 25hours.

“Food and beverage programming is a critical component of the lifestyle platform. We believe that food and beverage is more than just a sector of hospitality. It’s a key driver of the overall guest experience,” says Pasricha. “What we’re trying to do is to have the best of both worlds,” says Bhushan. “The autonomous portion caters to what the customer can touch and feel; everything from brand experience and product, to design, social media, and marketing would fall under this facet, which requires very specific skillsets and mindsets for operations and development.”

Ennismore, with the support of all of Accor’s regional hubs, is set to drive customer-centric areas through a heavily brand-focused setup. “Our goal is to fully utilize Accor’s presence in every single market; this requires a synergy between the new entity and on-the-ground finance, sales, revenue management, and more, not to mention technical services from highly skilled teams in every region,” adds the Accor Lifestyle CEO. “We’re putting together an unrivalled portfolio of unique brands, which appeals to owners, partners and guests, supported by the greatest set of talents in the industry, state-of-the-art distribution and tools, and a common ambition to continue to grow and innovate.”

In terms of revenue, Accor has stated that the lifestyle platform should achieve earnings of over $120 million by midterm, with the project expected to achieve earnings of over $300 million by 2024. As F&B brands Cleo and Carna by Dario Cecchini. These brands will be at the center of the global lifestyle platform. Accor also plans to buy out its partners in Mama Shelter and 25hours.

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In terms of revenue, Accor has stated that the lifestyle platform should achieve earnings of over $120 million by midterm, with the project resulting in significant cost synergies of approximately $10 million per year. Without a doubt, such partnerships in times of pandemic tend to take on a whole new meaning. For the Ennismore founder, the catastrophic aftermath of COVID-19 for travel and tourism, with its substantial effects on hospitality, may have paved the way for a new collective energy reallocation.

“There are a lot of projects and operations, the pandemic shines a spotlight on the importance of streamlining efforts,” Pasricha remarks. “Scale matters: if you combine the pipeline and portfolio that Accor brings, along with our offerings, and the collective ambition of our global development teams, then you have created great opportunities for the coming years.”

He believes that, given the nature of how Ennismore’s business model is split between stays and F&B, recovery is bound to be quick. In fact, even more so than it would be for traditional hotels, he opines. “Food and beverage programming is incredible across our properties; they also boast just the right mix of business and leisure, which sets us apart and avoids categorization and compartmentalization within those segments. As restrictions are lifted across countries and geographies, the lifestyle segment will be the fastest to recover, which places us at the forefront as we see markets re-emerge,” says Pasricha.

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According to Bhushan, Accor’s brands, from very high-end and luxury lifestyle, to more affordable names such as Mama Shelter, 25hours and Tribe are booming across all price points. “At the heart of what we’re trying to do, is to deliver an experience that’s consistent with that brand, and appeal to the modern, young traveler.”

Abiding by the business-first model, Pasricha explains how, during the past 10 months, every operator has had to digitize and get off the curve faster than had usually been the case. In Europe, a shift to QR codes, digital payments, as well as safer options across the board reflect flexibility, but the human factor has never lost its importance for the lifestyle entity. “We’re in the business of making sure our guests are inspired by what we do every day. You can do some of it through tech, but what we do–by large–is experiential, as we appreciate that human element.”

With an unwavering trust in the GCC market, Bhushan also asserts that Accor had not missed a beat in terms of development. “Take Saudi Arabia, for example; with the Kingdom’s vision, they have doubled down on investments and moved faster during the pandemic than before. We’re inking deals for big, new projects as we witness how they transform nation into a key tourist destination.”

The lifestyle connoisseur has also lauded the UAE government’s efforts in mitigating the effects of the pandemic, ensuring a steady flow of travel, with Dubai honoring its status as a global hub. “This region has evolved and reached a level of maturity where everyone understands the value of tourism. The greatest comfort that the decision-makers in these countries understand that tourism is key to their future,” he says.

Accor is also active in Qatar, having recently partnered with Katara Hospitality, a global hotel owner, for the two-fold signing of Raffles and Fairmont hotels. “I consider Accor’s Mondrian Doha to be the best hotel in the capital,” remarks Bhushan.

Speaking about Ennismore’s upcoming openings, Pasricha references SLS Dubai Hotel & Residences, which is set to welcome guests, residential, hotel and local alike, in the second quarter of 2021. In addition to the project, which is led by Bhushan, a 25hours property will be opening at the Emirate’s bustling One Central featuring close to 500 keys.

The Accor Lifestyle CEO concludes his interview on a very positive note: “The luxury business is as strong as ever; the pandemic has reinforced the significance of hotels as safe havens. For that reason, and beyond, irrespective of their brands, properties must offer experiences. The desire to travel is an innate one, and I’m reassured by what I’m seeing, because it proves to me that, no matter the circumstances, human beings will always seek just that.”

“THIS PARTNERSHIP ENABLES ACCOR TO BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF LIFESTYLE HOSPITALITY. WITH IT, THE GROUP REINFORCES ITS OFFERING IN ONE OF THE FASTEST-GROWING SEGMENTS OF THE INDUSTRY.”

GAURAV BHUSHAN | ACCOR LIFESTYLE

A globally recognised portfolio of 12 brands, 74 hotels with a further 186 in the pipeline
Leading from the front

FERIT ŞAHENK
CHAIRMAN AND CEO, DOĞUŞ GROUP

With an estimated net worth of US$2.3 billion, this Turkish billionaire’s insights on running a business are definitely worth learning from by ABY SAM THOMAS
Now, you may probably think here that, well, of course, Şahenk would behave in such a lively fashion with me and my team, and yes, you’ll also perhaps grant that, yes, that’s the way he works with the few members of his executive team who were also with us that morning. But what I found particularly interesting (and quite endearing, to be quite honest) is in the fact that I saw Şahenk exhibiting the same spirited attitude as he went about interacting with the staff that day at Roka- this is where you need to know that this award-winning restaurant falls under the purview of Doğuş Group’s hospitality arm, Dream (Doğuş Restaurant Entertainment and Management) International, of which Şahenk is Chairman. And so, when I saw Şahenk talk, applaud, and even joke with almost everyone in the Roka team who were there that morning, I found myself taken in by how the magnificent persona of this man, who, with an estimated net worth of US$2.3 billion, has been billed as one of the richest people in Turkey. Later, when I asked Şahenk about this friendly rapport that he demonstrated with the staff at the restaurant, he seemed almost surprised by the query, pointing out that there was nothing out of the ordinary in the way he interacted with his team—this was his family, he told me, and so, this was normal for him and his style of leadership. In fact, he believes that this is the only good way to behave with one’s employees, especially in a consumer-facing, experience-driven business like this. “Your employees are the face of your enterprise,” Şahenk says. “They are the ones keeping your brand and business going. So, if you don’t treat them with love, respect, and kindness, if you’re not working to keep them happy and satisfied, you can rest assured that your end customers aren’t going to be pleased with whatever it is you are offering. So, yes, I believe in treating all of my employees the best way I possibly can— I think you have to, if you want to run a successful business.”

Şahenk definitely knows a thing or two about running a thriving enterprise— Doğuş Group, which was founded by his father, Ayhan Şahenk, in 1951, is today one of the largest private sector conglomerates in Turkey, with its portfolio including over 300 companies and more than 19,000 employees working in businesses spanning sectors like automotive, real estate, construction, energy, and more. With its key hubs in London and Dubai, the Group’s interests in lifestyle and hospitality are today centered in D.ream International, which was launched in 2012—besides operating over 150 luxury F&B outlets in Turkey, it also has a global presence with over 60 restaurants across 13 brands in 11 countries. The latter has been made possible thanks to D.ream International’s efforts in seeking out and building partnerships with the likes of Azumi Group, Coya Group, Paraguas Group, and Nusr-Et Group—the foodies among you will recognize all four companies as the names behind some of the most celebrated concepts on the global F&B stage.

For instance, Azumi Group, founded by Arjun Waney and Rainer Becker, is the operator of brands like Roka, Zuma, Inko Nito, Etaru, and Oblix, while Paraguas Group, founded by Sandro Silvia and Marta Seco, runs Amazonico, El Paraguas, Numa Pompili, Ten Con Ten, Ultramarinos Quintin, and Aarde. Meanwhile, Nusr-Et Group’s claims to fame includes its eponymous steakhouse as well as the Salt Bae Burger concept, while Coya Group, founded by Arjun Waney and majority owned by Dream International, has its namesake restaurants spread around the world. A Google search of each of these restaurants will reveal that they are inventive, innovative concepts in their own right, and that definitely seems to figure into the modus operandi that D.ream International uses when deciding what brands it should associate itself with.

According to Şahenk, all of the restaurants under the D.ream International banner belong to what he calls the high-end luxury segment—this is the lifestyle domain where he believes he and his team have the requisite expertise and needed to win and lead in it. “Our restaurants offer what I like to call a theatrical experience to our guests,” Şahenk explains. “From the service given, to the food provided, to the entertainment we showcase, people come to our concepts for the unique experiences they get to enjoy at our establishments. They want to experience something out of the ordinary when they come to us, and we make sure we give them just that.” Actually, it’s Şahenk’s belief that the appeal of such restaurants has only been amplified following the COVID-19 crisis that struck in 2020, with people around the world wanting to move out of their current circumstances, and get back to enjoying the finer things in life as they once used to.

This is the sentiment that is reiterated by Teyfik Akdağ, one of Şahenk’s closest associates, who commenting on the current F&B landscape in the world at large. As a Supervisory Executive Board Member of D.ream International, Akdağ is extremely well-versed about this industry, a fact that is bolstered by his executive level roles in Doğuş Group’s hubs in Dubai and London, as well as by his participation in the boards of several of its operating companies. According to Akdağ, all of the brands that fall under his company’s banner today are seeing a renewed interest from patrons, regardless of whether they are located in, say, Madrid, or Riyadh. “Given the desire and demand that we are seeing from our customers around the world, the future is looking quite bright for us,” Akdağ says. “The experiences that we are offering are working because we are offering our guests at the center of everything we do, and that is something that is going to stand us in good stead as we move into a world after the coronavirus pandemic.”

“From the service given, to the food provided, to the entertainment we showcase, people come to our concepts for the unique experiences they get to enjoy at our establishments. They want to experience something out of the ordinary when they come to us, and we make sure we give them just that.”
But this is not to say that the business is not paying attention to the changes that are afoot in the world around us either. Having seen the ongoing boom in the online food delivery space, Şahenk reveals that his company is working on setting up a cloud kitchen business of its own, with them tapping into the unique brands in their portfolio to offer something new and unique to this particular sector. However, Şahenk says that this new offering will continue to target the lifestyle connoisseurs that they know how to serve—when I asked him if he’d ever consider entering into the mass market segment, he replies with an emphatic no. Why? “Because we wouldn’t be good at it,” he responds, in a matter-of-fact tone. “We know our slice of the market, and we know we can do very good things within it. As such, it makes sense for us to focus our efforts on doing what we do best, and build on our niche. That’s what is going to guarantee our success in the long term.”

It should be clear by now that Şahenk is keeping himself very closely involved with all of what’s happening in his business, which is evidenced by him, say, keeping a finger on the pulse of the market at large and looking out for opportunities, or even with his intent interest in ensuring his staff’s happiness and well-being. All of this points to a man who is deeply passionate about the work he does, and Şahenk describes his temperament as a lifestyle in itself, because he can’t imagine himself doing anything differently either. Indeed, when I asked him what drives him to do what he does every day, Şahenk first answered by saying that he is propelled by the idea that the business he works on creates jobs, and that in turn ensures the livelihoods of so many people, wherein they are empowered to dream and build better futures for themselves and the ones they hold dear.

Now, this is, of course, a noble undertaking by itself, and while I could see Şahenk being spearheaded by this notion, I wanted to figure out the underlying factors behind this mentality, and so I kept drilling him on this, asking him to tell me why he wakes every morning to go to work. “Because I am alive,” he replies, finally. “It’s a gift to be alive. It’s a gift to be given the talents and skills we have, and build on our niche.”

Şahenk pauses for a moment here, reflecting on what he said, and then adds, “I don’t really see what other reason one needs than that.” Can’t say I disagree—would you?
With a global expansion underway, the Peruvian restaurant COYA is now making its presence felt around the world. We talk to three key figures behind the brand fueling its growth: Yannis Stanisiere, Chief Operating Officer, COYA Restaurant Group, Sanjay Dwivedi, Culinary Director, COYA, and Benjamin Wan, Executive Chef, COYA Middle East.

"COYA IS A JOURNEY. A LIFESTYLE EXPERIENCE."

YANNIS STANISIERE
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, COYA RESTAURANT GROUP

What sets the COYA concept apart? What are some of the most unique dining elements it boasts that keep diners coming back for more?

What sets the COYA concept apart is the multifaceted experience that we offer. This is unique! There is a journey, a full experience which goes beyond dining and makes our customers want to go back. We want to give over and over to our customers this unique and memorable dining experience.

But before anything, COYA is a restaurant with fantastic food and service. We are consistent. This is the key to sustainability and loyalty from our guests. Our teams on the ground make it happen.

COYA is a combination of Peruvian food, serving innovative pisco infusion with its very own exclusive pisco library, featuring cultural events with our ongoing commitment to art and our pride in being an authentic art destination and, with our UNICEF & Azucar’s nights. We strive to offer our customers an experience that they want to come back to over and over again. From art exhibitions, to culinary masterclasses, such happenings are part of COYA’s edge.

Please tell us more about the importance of culture and entertainment to the brand.

To set us apart from other establishments, we want to give our clients not just an ordinary dining experience. We strive to offer our customers a cultural atmosphere to walk away with something extra at the end of the visit. Art is part of the COYA culture and atmosphere.

How has your extensive experience in F&B helped you build a vision of what you wanted to bring to the COYA brand?

COYA is a journey. A lifestyle experience. Our principal Ferit Şahenk, Chairman and CEO of Doğuş Group, has a vision. It is up to us to make it happen. I hope to be able to share an extensive experience in F&B with different concepts, volumes in various continents, to the team I work with and that we can take the brand to another level while maintaining its DNA and excitement. I will strive to bring best practices and some structure in order to be able to develop COYA as one of the best lifestyle destinations and make it even more successful.

How do you create different experiences across your venues around the world—adapting to the intricacies of every culture and diner profile—while maintaining the essence of the brand?

Understanding the local clientele and culture are the key elements to make each COYA restaurant more personable to each city. We believe that adding a little personal touch of local culture to each establishment is the key to our success. We always adapt ourselves to the local market at various levels.

What are some localization tactics which you have implemented in order to increase brand appeal among Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh guests?

Understanding the city’s life is very crucial when localizing each establishment. For example, while Dubai’s clientele is more international and tourist-driven, we have a lot of locals who are our loyal customers since day one. And our Abu Dhabi location is also mainly driven by local and business clientele, we slightly adjusted the concept accordingly to fit the local needs.

Are you planning on expanding to other countries in the MENA, specifically the GCC?

Yes, we are, as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is opening up as a market with solid opportunities. Nonetheless, we are very present in the Middle East at large, and we will continue our growth in top lifestyle European target cities and locations...
Please tell us more about the idea behind the COYA Dubai and COYA Mayfair London members’ clubs, and how they have helped the brand.

As Sanjay once told me, “COYA, to me, is you coming to my home. I just have a bigger dining room and a bigger kitchen.” Having a members’ club gives us this opportunity to get to know our clients personally, and we can offer them a more personalized experience and a family atmosphere. It has been helping our business to grow further and strengthen the ties with our loyal clients. Our members have access to personalized cocktails, menu items, service, art and we have a 2021-2022 plan to increase these added values.

How did you overcome challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and mitigate its effects given the hard hit that F&B has endured around the world?

In the pandemic, we needed to be open-minded and think about what we could do to maintain our best to offer our customers. We came up with a few initiatives on the take-out services and tried our best to make it exciting for our clients and keep them engaged. The key was to adapt rapidly to minimize the impact of the pandemic.

What are your future plans for COYA and its development on a global scale?

We want to position ourselves as one of the top luxury lifestyle brands. There are several markets where we believe COYA could be successful and currently we are pursuing several leads in Ibiza, St Tropez, St Barth, Milano, Marakech, Zurich and others.

“WE WANT TO POSITION OURSELVES AS ONE OF THE TOP LUXURY LIFESTYLE BRANDS.”

Please tell us more about some of the most important milestones in your career, and the moments which have helped shape your journey.

Two significant milestones helped me shape who I am today. The first one was when I moved from the restaurant manager to the corporate side as Director of New Builds, and the second one was when I became the COO of COYA.

To transition from floor operation to corporate taught me how to look at the business on a global scale and strategize and execute the plan for each concept in an accurate and timely manner. Effective decision making, allocating resources, recruiting, and hiring critical positions to each establishment are crucial elements for opening successful establishments.

The second milestone was when I became the COO of COYA. Working at this level is an exciting opportunity for me to grow even further, and I am looking forward to contributing to COYA and its further success.

The beauty of our job and one of its keys to success is to keep extremely connected and close to the teams, the clients and the operations. This is a business where we need to keep taking the pulse of our restaurants daily.

Sanjay’s passion towards food flourished during your childhood; please tell us more about how your family has influenced your culinary journey.

When I was ten years old, I remember going on a holiday to Visakhapatnam, a coastal town in India. My mother’s cousin owned a five-star hotel there named The Sun n Sea Hotel. During one of my visits to the hotel, I was allowed to go inside the restaurant’s kitchen, where the head chef prepared a dish. It was a whole fish with fresh herbs, lemon and butter all enased in a paper bag and cooked in a steamer. When the fish was ready, the chef carefully opened the paper bag right in front of me. The aroma and the taste of the fish was mind boggling. It was just magical. I have never seen such theater behind a dish, and I guess a culinary seed was planted in my head at that moment. I was brought up on spices and all food was either cooked on a gas stove or on a BBQ grill. To have a steamed fish with no spices was for me an explosion of flavors – simply just the fish flavored with herbs and lemon.

Sanjay Dhwivedi
CULINARY AMBASSADOR, COYA

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From there on, I started to do few experiments with food. I loved to watch my grandmother cook and we spent time in the kitchen together. By the age of 15, I was a champion in making omelets for all family members. I remember I tried different methods. To name a few – I whipped the egg whites separately and then added the egg yolk. Another one was cooking tomatoes, onions, green peppers, and chilies together and then adding these ingredients to whipped eggs, and baking them together in the oven. To this day, every time I visit India, there is an Omelets Sunday by Sanjay, where I make omelets for our extended family members. Last year, just before the pandemic, I was in India, where I had to make 30 omelets and as always, a great hit with the family.

You have had a very colorful career, filled with dishes served to celebrities and prominent figures; what were some of the most memorable moments long the way?

We had a number of prominent people and celebrities visiting our outlets over the years. When we first opened COYA Monaco, we had a guest from the royal family visit us. I remember speaking with them and showing them around the restaurant. They were very impressed, and I guess we were happy to see a restaurant like COYA coming to their city.

I am a big fan of Formula 1. Every year, during the Monaco Grand Prix, we would have Lewis Hamilton coming in for dinner with his friends. I remember back in 2018 when we opened COYA Monaco, Lewis came in after the race for dinner. I went up to his table and mentioned I was his biggest fan. I guess he hit the right spot. We had raving reviews and best of all is that people felt in love with COYA. I have never been as happy as when I opened COYA Monaco ever more than when we received a Michelin star at my previous restaurant.

I love experimenting with flavours and ingredients. One of the ceviches we serve at COYA is the Corvina Trufa Ceviche that has corvina, truffles, ponzu, and chives. It was quite unimaginable and unusual to use truffles and raw fish together, but the lime and the ponzu help bring out its flavours. In COYA Dubai, we used the red snapper instead of corvina and it has been the outlet’s best-selling ceviche. It is the menu items like these that make COYA unique.

The best-selling dish of COYA across all outlets is Arroz Nikkeri Causella or the Chilean seafood with rice, lime and chilli. I created this dish with influences from Peru, Spain and the UK. The Chilean seafood is marinated in miso, aji amarillo, tamarind, and soy for a minimum of 24 hours. For the rice, we use paella rice, which is cooked with dashi stock flavoured with soya, ginger, garlic and aji amarillo. Once the rice is cooked, we finish it with lime and chilli batter. We serve with Chilean seabass, cooked over charcoal and adding sweetcorn puree and pea shoots as the finishing touch.

The beauty of all that we are creating something new and unique, and I believe this has been one of the key reasons of COYA’s success.

Benjamin Wan
Executive Chef, COYA Middle East

You grew up in a restaurant environment. How has it shaped your journey towards becoming a culinary head?

The desire to become a chef was there from the outset. My passion was always to cook, but I never intended to be a head chef or lead a team. I think that the most important thing is if you show pride in your work, do your best, and enjoy, and you will go places.

Starting off with French-casual cuisine, how have you developed your skills and explored other global palates?

My background has always been French cuisine. I believe the discipline, skills and techniques I learned have put me in good stead and helped me progress through my career. I have implemented these into COYA’s kitchens as a matter of course. In terms of palates, it was a big leap for me at first to shift from French to Latin American cuisine. Traveling to Peru helped me a lot. It took a lot of adjusting and required a lot of understanding of ingredients and techniques. There’s no better way for me to appreciate and understand the food and culture than actually experiencing it myself.

How has your training in France helped you in your role as head chef at COYA Dubai?

The French kitchen is a very structured and disciplined environment. My experience working at numerous restaurants and executing French cuisine have definitely influenced the way I run the kitchen and manage my team. My goal every day is to pass down that disciplined work ethic to my team and encourage everyone to get involved and work together effectively.

How has the transition from COYA Dubai to overseeing the brand’s culinary offerings across its Middle East locations inspired you as a chef?

The transition was challenging as I have always been very hands on in the kitchen. It required me to step back from daily operations in the kitchen. I’m very fortunate to have a team in all locations that I can trust and believe in and I’m thankful that I have their support also.

What are some of your favorite dishes at COYA? What about popular eats and bestsellers?

My favourite dish is the Pulpo Rostiizado or roasted octopus with potato, bottarga, botijol olives, aji amarillo. It’s our take on the Spanish dish Pulpo a la Gallega. The Arroz Nikkeri or the Chilean seabass with rice, lime, chilli has always been a firm favourite and bestseller at all COYA locations.

COYA is known for its fresh offerings; how do you choose ingredients and source them, ensuring that you get it right every single time?

Choosing the right supplier is an onerous yet vital process. It took a lot of communication and trial and error to build the relationships we have now with our suppliers, but it is key to source the best produce locally and globally. The quality of our ingredients is paramount to our success.

What were some of the biggest challenges you have faced during the pandemic?

When regulators asked restaurants to close last year, we thought of how colleagues can support themselves and their families as well as how we can continue looking after each other and our guests. This is how we came up with ‘COYA 2 U’. Our very own delivery and takeaway platform that brings their favorite signature dishes for them to enjoy at home. It was very tricky at first; to switch from in-house fine dining to packaging the same quality food for delivery was challenging. Adjusting to the timings of the execution of the food due to the delivery timings was new to us. It was a challenge, but something we are relishing and overcoming. We are learning everyday. But it’s comforting to see the orders still coming through and the positive feedback from our guests.
DOUBLING DOWN

With the launch of the **first SLS hotel in the Middle East**, its parent company Accor is signaling its commitment to the lucrative lifestyle segment by **DEVINA DIVECHA**

IT’S HARD to miss the SLS Dubai Hotel & Residences on Marasi Drive in Business Bay. The 75 story-tall building is making its debut in April 2021, and it will become the seventh SLS hotel in the world and the first in the Middle East.

Its launch is coming at a time when SLS’ mothership, Accor, has been making a bigger push into the lifestyle segment, by acquiring SLS’ founding company, sbe, and forming a new lifestyle entity with Ennismore.

These developments will only serve to further highlight the opportunities that exist for sbe and its brands, according to Chadi Farhat, Chief Operating Officer at sbe. “The acquisition of sbe hotel brands by Accor will not change the DNA of our brands, but instead, together with the Accor, Ennismore and sbe executives, we will continue to evaluate and improve each of our brands and their lifestyle offerings from programming to culinary and mixology experiences,” Farhat says. 99
“SLS HAS ALWAYS POISED ITSELF TO BE SOMETHING DIFFERENT.”

Spencer Wadama, General Manager, SLS Dubai

“Being part of Accor supports the growth of not just the SLS brand, but all our hotel brands globally,” he continues. “We just announced the opening of SLS Cancun in Mexico. We’re very excited to open our first SLS hotel in the Middle East, which will follow the opening this year of the first SLS Hotel and Residence in Puerto Madero, Argentina.”

The SLS Dubai, owned by World of Wonders Real Estate Development, is not a small undertaking, with 254 hotel rooms, 321 hotel apartments, and 371 branded residences. The hotel’s general manager is Dubai veteran Spencer Wadama, who has been in the region for a decade now. The Californian native says, “SLS has always been a really cool brand.”

The first SLS was in Beverly Hills, and I have stayed in that hotel when I went to Los Angeles. It was just cool. You had celebrity sightings all the time, the vibe around the pool and the lobby was exactly what you’d hope to see when you go to LA.”

The brand has thus always been on Wadama’s radar, and joining the property felt like the right fit. “I like the concept, and I think the future for hospitality is more in lifestyle,” Wadama stresses that the hotel offers a wide range of propositions for both the business and leisure traveler. He ticks off the spacious living spaces and connecting rooms for the family traveler, along with the working spaces available in each room for the business guest. He adds, “One of the upscaling points of this property is that we have large terraces that we like to say is an extension of your living space—because the living room goes right into the terrace, which is almost the same size of the living space.”

While Wadama and his team are targeting a wide range of source markets, he notes that the only challenge with SLS was that people in the local market weren’t as aware of the brand. “The good thing is that our sales center for real estate has been open the last couple of years, so there’s a lot of curiosity around it, and people have started to identify what the brand is,” he adds.

While the 371 branded residences do not fall under Wadama’s purview, its owners will have full access to all the services and amenities of the hotel. The remaining 575 rooms (254 hotel rooms, and 321 hotel apartments) will be managed by Wadama’s team, with the hotel apartments already gaining a lot of traction. “We are already getting enquiries and contracts for long stay which I do think is a very important market here in Dubai,” he adds.

Another plus point for the hotel, especially in a post-pandemic world, is the meeting space that caters to smaller groups of 50 people and under. Wadama highlights that all the meeting spaces blend the indoors and outdoors with attractive patios and are all located on the 7th floor so offer stunning views of the city’s skyline. “We want to make this a great place for people to work, but also to entertain,” Wadama says. “That’s what people are looking for.”

The hotel also flips a few well-worn tropes on its head, by placing the lobby and its F&B offerings on the top floors, rather than ground. Guests can check-in, for example, at the Sky Lobby on the 71st floor, complete with panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows and natural lighting. “We are a giant building, and one of the things I recognized was that unlike every other hotel in Dubai which puts all the public space at the bottom, our owner was bold enough to put everything on top,” the general manager reiterates. “We have to keep the buzz and excitement going, and we can never rest on our laurels. We are not trying to open hotel restaurants; we are trying to open restaurants in a hotel.”

“TOGETHER WITH THE ACCOR, ENNISMORE AND SBE EXECUTIVES, WE WILL CONTINUE TO EVALUATE AND IMPROVE EACH OF OUR BRANDS AND THEIR LIFESTYLE OFFERINGS FROM PROGRAMMING TO CULINARY AND MIXOLOGY EXPERIENCES.”

Chadi Farhat, COO, sbe

More recently, F&B outlets have generally been positioned on the ground floor of hotels, and usually with a separate entrance to offer an “independent” feel. However, Wadama discounts the notion that the hotel’s unusual move could be a risk, pointing out that there are plenty of people who will make a special trip if the experience is worth it. “If the experience is amazing, and the quality of food and service is what it should be, people will come,” he reiterates. “We have to keep the buzz and excitement going, and we can never rest on our laurels. We are not trying to open hotel restaurants; we are trying to open restaurants in a hotel.”
The food & beverage offering within the property includes SBE’s signature culinary concepts Fi’lia, an authentic Italian restaurant, and Carna by Dario Cecchini, a contemporary steakhouse from the legendary butcher from Tuscany, Italy. SBE’s mixology lounge is located in the lobby, and there’s also the signature rooftop venue, Privilege, which is set to delight visitors with two infinity pools overlooking Dubai’s skyline. EllaMia is a sophisticated café that brings its dedicated Los Angeles-based coffee culture to Dubai, and at 12 Chairs Caviar Bar, caviar takes center stage, reserved for only 12 guests.

Following Wadama’s assertion that the brand is “opening restaurants in a hotel,” it’s worth noting that general managers have been hired for the restaurants, as opposed to restaurant managers, so as to ensure they treat their restaurants as their own independent ventures. Still, he admits the need to be cautious, especially in uncertain times. “We’re not being too bullish; we’re not opening with the full inventory. We are opening at 50% from a room standpoint, and fully open with F&B except Privilege. This is the beauty of the partnership with Accor; it opened up a lot of doors for us where we as an independent SLS brand would never be able to get into. That makes a huge difference for us, and gets us into a market which we wouldn’t have had access to before.”

IN FOCUS
SBE
The journey of SBE has been a long and fruitful one. The company was established in 2002 by Sam Nazarian, which then acquired boutique lifestyle hospitality operator, Morgans Hotel Group, in 2016. Accor then fully acquired SBE’s hotel brands in December 2020 after holding a 50% stake in the company, with Nazarian remaining as a special advisor to Sébastien Bazin, Chairman and CEO of Accor.

SBE’s hotel and residential brands include SLS, Delano, Mondrian, Hyde, The House of Originals, The Redbury, and its culinary and nightlife concepts include Katsuya by Chef Katsuya Uechi, Cleo, Fi’lia, Carna and Bottega di Carna by Dario Cecchini, Leynia and Diez y Seis, Hyde, Skybar, Bond, Dandelyan, Blind Spot, Smoke & Mirrors, and Privilege. SBE.com

Farhat agrees—the acquisition of SBE by Accor not only offers up benefits to the brand, but also to its owners. “One of the advantages of being fully integrated with Accor is that now we can provide benefits to our residential owners under the Accor Global Benefit Program, which affords benefits across the entire global Accor portfolio,” Farhat explains. “For example, going forward, SLS Dubai and all our future hotel openings will be part of the ALL Accor Live Limitless loyalty program. More importantly, resident owners will enjoy the benefit of being included in the ALL Loyalty Program at the Platinum level and a series of other benefits including but not limited to welcome amenities, early and late checkout, complimentary upgrades and exclusive discounts.”

As for Wadama himself, he is especially looking forward to what the future holds for the first SLS hotel in the Middle East. “There’s a lot of interest in the market, because SLS has always poised itself to be something different,” Wadama concludes. “My job with the team that I have is to make something unique and different.”

“ONE OF THE UPSELLING POINTS OF THIS PROPERTY IS THAT WE HAVE LARGE TERRACES THAT WE LIKE TO SAY IS AN EXTENSION OF YOUR LIVING SPACE—BECAUSE THE LIVING ROOM GOES RIGHT INTO THE TERRACE, WHICH IS ALMOST THE SAME SIZE OF THE LIVING SPACE.”
NO SHORTCUTS TO SUCCESS

Want to emulate the accomplishments of this Formula One legend? Get ready to put in the work, he says by A BY SAM THOMAS

FLAVIO BRIATORE
FOUNDER, BILLIONAIRE
“Retiring is not about age,” he says. “In Italy, for instance, a lot of people have more energy at 60 than someone at 24. I will retire the moment I think I am not bringing the same vigor to work as I do today... I think that you should only stop working when you feel that someone’s doing what you do better than you. You should retire only when you find someone who’s thinking on the same level, if not higher, than you... So, no, retiring is not in my vocabulary.” At this moment, I ask Briatore, “So, you think you’re still the best [at what you do]?” Briatore has a huge smile on his face when he quips back, “I don’t think so... I am.”

If I had heard that declaration from anyone else, I probably would have chalked that off as an indication of their arrogance, but given that Briatore said it, I can see it as nothing other than a statement to the success he has seen as an entrepreneur so far, especially with the Billionaire brand that he founded as a nightclub in Sardinia, Italy in 1998. Briatore recalls starting up the Billionaire Club Porto Cervo as a hobby of sorts during his time at Formula One, but it ended up becoming his primary activity once he exited the racing circuit. Looking back on the club’s origins, Briatore remembers wanting the very popular location of Sardinia to have a place that’d offer “good service, good product, good music, good staff,” and that’s essentially what he built with Billionaire.

When I spoke with Billionaire founder Flavio Briatore over a Zoom call in March this year, he was just a month away from celebrating his 71st birthday, and at one point during our conversation, I asked the Formula One legend, whose business prowess sees him today actively working and developing his entrepreneurial endeavors around the world, if he would be considering a retirement any time soon. The Italian businessman quickly replied with an emphatic “no,” saying that he is enjoying what he is doing on a day-to-day basis today, especially given the fact that he is working for his own company at this point in time.

“I am knowledgeable, and because it’s my business nonetheless. Why? “Because I am knowledgeable, and because it’s my passion,” he replies, in a matter-of-fact manner. “Normally, when you find yourself at an entertainment destination, you’ll often find the food is not good, or some other aspect of it doesn’t work,” he explains. “With Billionaire, we were aiming for excellence in everything—so, think top food, top entertainment, top staff, top DJs, etc. This is what we started, and this is what worked to our advantage.” Sardinia was already a favorite for the international jet set at that point in time, and they all gravitated towards Briatore’s club owing to its unique offering, thereby growing its fame and popularity. This led to the Billionaire brand becoming synonymous with “outstanding service, along with excellent music and entertainment, in an electrifying atmosphere,” and soon enough, Briatore was looking for other locations he could take the concept to. That hunt is what resulted in the Billionaire brand opening an outpost here in the Middle East in Dubai in 2010, and another one in Riyadh earlier this year.

“With Billionaire, I didn’t just create a company,” Briatore says. “I created a lifestyle and a series of aspirational brands, which I am proud to see recognized and appreciated everywhere today.” Besides Billionaire, Briatore has also been spearheading two other brands that he conceptualized—one of them is Twiga, a nightclub concept that currently exists in Monte Carlo, Forte de Marmi, and London, and it’s all set to open in other locations around the world as well. Briatore’s newest venture is Crazy Pizza, an F&B brand operating currently in London and Monte Carlo, whose stupendous success is seeing it expand soon into the Middle East, Europe and USA. But that’s not all—besides his own ventures, Briatore also operates two other brands under license: Cipriani Monte Carlo and Cova Milano, also in Monte Carlo. While Briatore says he has executive teams in place to manage and operate each of these companies, he admits that he likes to get involved in all aspects of the business nonetheless. Why? “Because I am knowledgeable, and because it’s my passion,” he replies, in a matter-of-fact fashion...
It's this sentiment of Briatore's that I remember as he shares how the Billionaire concept has undergone an evolution in order to cater to the new normal brought on by the global coronavirus pandemic in 2020. “Last year, we completely changed Billionaire,” he says. “COVID-19 has made us change our philosophy.” Using its Dubai outpost as an example, Briatore explains that Billionaire used to operate on a “80% disco, 20% restaurant” model; however, today, it has been remodeled as a restaurant that includes a spectacular live stage show to entertain its patrons through the course of an evening. This show, which has been built under the artistic direction of Montserrat Moré (formerly of Cirque du Soleil, Lío, and Pacha in Ibiza), guarantees guests have a spell-binding experience that is the trademark of the Billionaire concept. Briatore says the revamped version of Billionaire has already been received warmly by its patrons in Dubai, and while the brand has had to recently pause its operations as a result of governmental guidelines, it is raring to come back as well.

Hearing Briatore speak about his business’ evolution makes it clear that he remains very involved with all of his entrepreneurial endeavors, and this passion is being fueled by what he indicates as a sort of an innate need to uplift those around him. “My drive is quite simple,” he says. “If you’re an entrepreneur, whatever field you may be in, you’re almost certainly creating jobs for people... This is what drives me- creating jobs, creating opportunities.” This is perhaps Briatore’s way of paying it forward—after all, it is thanks to the opportunities he was given at one point in time— and the work he did to capitalize on them—that he became the celebrated Formula One icon he is today. And Briatore reinforces this sentiment in me when I ask him to share his advice for people who may wish to have the success he has seen in his lifetime. “First of all, know that the success I’ve seen is not thanks to a lottery,” he says, quite unabashedly. “You have to work very, very hard. I had nothing... But I worked very, very hard to get to where I am today.”

Briatore is not bluffing when he says that—long before he became known for his work with Billionaire or Formula One, this celebrated business tycoon was once an insurance salesman on the streets of Italy. But the work ethic he had then is the same one he showcases today—and that has made all the difference. “When I was selling insurance, I was the best at it,” he recalls. “I used to sell more insurance than any of my colleagues, and the reason for that was because I worked hard to make that happen. I used to work from seven in the morning till midnight, and I even used to work on the weekends—the latter was especially good for me, because there was less competition for me on holidays, and so while my colleagues took a break, I was making the most of the time I had.”

It is this unflappable work ethic that Briatore recommends to anyone who wishes to emulate his success in the business world. “If you’re a waiter, you should strive to be the best waiter out there... If you’re a manager, you should strive to be the best manager out there. You need to be improving yourself, whatever you are doing, all the time. Sometimes, the job you have may not be the one you dream of—but it’s still a job. And you should start from that—the best in what you do. That’s what will open up new avenues for you, new opportunities.” Indeed, from Briatore’s point of view, the formula for success is a very simplistic one. “You will have success, if you deserve it,” he declares. “And to deserve success, you need to be working very, very hard.”

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“I always wanted to be the best.”

JOELLE MARDINIAN

SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR, TELEVISION HOST, AND MAKEUP ARTIST JOELLE MARDINIAN, ON THE DRIVING FORCES BEHIND HER LIFE AND CAREER BY TAMARA PUPIC

I have always wanted to be known for being the best at what I do,” the Lebanon-born and London-raised Joelle Mardinian says, matter-of-factly. If you count her followers on social media— for instance, her Instagram account has crossed the 16 million followers mark at the time of writing— Mardinian is among the MENA region’s top social influencers. Her Joelle Show on MBC1 is the longest running makeover TV program in the region, making her one of the most popular Arab TV presenters.

In view of this, vanity can be explained, if not expected, and therefore, it piques my interest why there is nothing in Mardinian’s demeanor to even suggest it. “It doesn’t matter what it is, be it a fitness instructor, an underwater baby instructor, or a makeup artist, I have always been competitive, and I don’t want to be in second place,” she continues, without sounding pretentious, although nothing about her and around her is modest. “I always want to be the best. I want to be at the same level as other people who are the best, if not better than them, but never behind.”

Her voice, echoing the perhaps harsher, more serious tones of responsibility, serves as proof that Mardinian is the entrepreneur at the helm of Joelle Group, a beauty conglomerate which includes the high-end beauty salon Maison de Joelle (since 2008), cosmetic clinic Clinica Joelle (since 2013), skincare brand Joelle Paris (since 2014), and more recently, a line of colored lenses, EyeCandy. And as I carried on my conversation with Mardinian, I started to feel like there must be some deeper force at work beneath her drive to join what she considers to be a hallowed category of successful individuals in society. “I get too jealous, too hurt, and I beat myself up, actually— this is a personal thing, nothing against these people,” she explains. “I want the best for them, but I want to be like them. If I am not like them, if I’m not reaching that level of perfection that I see in other people, I get super hard on myself.”

Her level of achievement does come at great personal sacrifice. Yet, Mardinian hardly mentions it. And so, she will talk about checking social media, emails, and messages immediately after waking up, working for 18 hours per day, and not resting until literally falling asleep, only to support her objection against those who are not willing to pay the high price of hard work. “To all the people who comment that they’d like to have ‘a half of my wealth,’ I say that they can have it all, if they can work this much,” she says. “It really hurts me, because I’ve been working since I was 14 years old. I was babysitting at 14. I was working at a kids’ shoe shop at the age of 16. I qualified as a fitness instructor at the age of 17, then a makeup artist at 22, an underwater baby instructor at 27.”

IMAGES COURTESY JOELLE MARDINIAN
Going back in time, Mardinian tenderly traces the arcs of her love for Lebanon by describing her happy childhood spent in the mountains surrounding Beirut, while the intonation of her voice becomes clearer and more deliberate when explaining that her mother—also a makeup artist—instilled in her the work ethic that, in London years later, resulted in Mardinian styling celebrities enlisted by Sony Records.

Dubai, she says, opened its doors for her in 2004, and quickly after she launched the Joelle Show on MBC1. “It has been about me showing to the world what I can do with one person, how I can transform her,” Mardinian says of its success throughout its many seasons. “I have been tested every week. I saw it as if every week I was sitting in an exam, and not as just presenting a show. It isn’t about me, what I look like or what I wear, but what I am actually delivering to that other person.”

The beginnings were hard, to say the least. “At the time, I couldn’t read Arabic properly, I didn’t have the script, and so on,” she adds. Her effort paid off though, and before long, Mardinian started building a beauty empire. Launched in 2008, Maison de Joelle started out as a high-end salon at the Kempinski Hotel in Dubai, and today, it has 14 franchises in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Tunisia, Bahrain, Jordan, and Algeria. It is Mardinian’s very first entrepreneurial endeavor. “I had zero knowledge about starting up and running a business,” she says. “I remember overseeing the tiles on the floor, the wallpaper, every chair, literally. I don’t know why but I always have this burning feeling that I want to do more. It’s never been about money. I didn’t even think about how much money it should be making, I just wanted it to be the best salon in the region. End of story. Full stop.” In a moment, a flashback to the beginnings of Maison de Joelle unearths discomfort, and Mardinian describes the heavy burden of entrepreneurial risks. “People just see the glamour, but they don’t understand the sleepless nights, or that, for example, for Maison de Joelle I had a partner at the beginning, and then he wanted to exit,” she says. “I was going to the bank personally, begging for a loan, and I had to take two to buy him out. It had been four years before I made one dirham. I was working so hard for something that wasn’t making me any money. That opened my mind to other celebrities who start a business and don’t get past three months, because they don’t want to work on something that isn’t lucrative or giving them any cash, but for me, it has never been about that.”

And so, she persevered. The salon rode out of the 2008 financial storm quite successfully, and Mardinian recalls that the income incurred after it, in 2010 to be precise, was the highest the business has ever seen. However, Maison de Joelle also taught Mardinian a key lesson on entrepreneurship, which is to always have a cost-conscious approach when running a business. “I remember that one of the very first steps, a very tough step, that I had to make was being forced to sack seven staff in one day, so that I didn’t go bankrupt,” she says. “I had over-

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Maison de Joelle’s latest endeavor is Clinica Joelle, a cosmetic clinic with branches in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and franchise operations in six countries, including KSA, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, Egypt, and Bahrain. It came to life in 2013 due to Mardinian unintentionally finding herself at the cross of the supply and demand curves of the region’s plastic surgery industry—her Just Joelle TV show grew her network among the region’s best plastic surgeons, while Maison de Joelle attracted a steady stream of customers interested in those treatments. 20
"I thought that I should open a medical center, because I had the connections with the best in the industry, and, on the other hand, people trusted me enough to always ask for my advice," Mardinian says. "To be honest, it was easier for me to run Clinica Joelle than Maison de Joelle, because at a medical center, you are dealing with doctors, very professional people, and there is a different standard. However, there was a new lesson to be learned, and that was how to deal with these doctors, and how to approach them when you wanted something to be changed. They have certain standards of how they are used to being treated, and we have learned to handle that, successfully." Hearing Mardinian speak of this, I can’t help but feel that this was just another challenge that she had tackled and overcome saying, "End of story. Full stop."

"WE ALL MUST BE WORKING ON SOMETHING ON THE SIDE, ON AN ADDITIONAL THING, EVEN IF IT IS SOMETHING SMALL, JUST TO HAVE SOMETHING MORE TO RELY ON, AND THEN THE NEXT AND THE NEXT AND THE NEXT. WE CAN ALL DO SO MUCH."

One year later, in 2014, Mardinian was ready for her third lesson on starting up yet another successful business, and it came in the form of Joelle Paris, a skincare and haircare brand with a wide range of products that are today available across the GCC region, as well as globally through an online store. "After we launched Joelle Paris, the biggest mistake was that I gave it to one beauty chain, exclusively," she says. "In my mind, I thought they would take Joelle Paris to the moon because we gave them the exclusivity, but that was when I witnessed that departments in other people's businesses could be such failures. The staff really did not care. So, the biggest mistake was to trust that someone will represent you well, and I realized that I represent myself much better than anyone else." In addition to learning that her marketing prowess was hard to find, Mardinian was reminded of the dangers of letting one's talents slide. "When I see the potential that a person has and what they can achieve but they don’t use, it hurts me," she explains. "In many cases, they have been given an opportunity that I have never been given. I've always had to go after what I want. I still go and pitch to everyone. I don't have this, 'Oh, I'm Joelle, if they want me, they should come to me' attitude. No, it's not like that at all. I still go after what I want.

I believe this sentence - the only moment I see Mardinian slouch throughout our conversation is a moment when she utters, "So, yes, I've learnt so much along the way." But then, in the split of a second, she starts talking about her latest project, EyeCandy, a line of colored lenses. "It was born during the lockdown, because I had not had time for it before," she says, energetically. "Three years ago, I realized the huge industry of contact lenses, but I wanted to do it right. I used to look at the branding of other brands and wonder why they all were black. They should be colorful and beautiful. I also used to think that there were not many differences between the colors and shades of the lenses, but I had already had three big businesses. Then, with the lockdown, all of my businesses were closed, so I finally had the time to work on it."

In being sold online, EyeCandy can survive any crisis, she says, and that opens space for my question on whether her advice for fellow entrepreneurs. "We all must be working on something on the side, on an additional thing, even if it is something small, just to have something more to rely on, and then the next and the next and the next. We can all do so much."

This mindset explains why reaching one entrepreneurial peak after another has never left her feeling drained, but determined to come back with renewed force, and that is not something of a novelty in her family, she says. "My father was never with fewer than three jobs," Mardinian adds, before continuing with her advice for fellow entrepreneurs. "We all must be working on something on the side, on a line or fashion accessory. We have to be thinking about the next and the next."

Our conversation turns to her family, and her three children, and how after spending her early childhood in Beirut and her formative years in London, Dubai is where she has situated herself in the world. However, Mardinian starts explaining that, out of the three cities, she still cherishes the most her memories of Lebanon, but its troubles over the past few years, especially with the 2020 Beirut blast, has left her feeling resentful about her nation. "I used to say that I don’t like Lebanon, but now I know that it has always been anger," Mardinian says. "I’m angry at what politicians did to my country. I’ve always had to deal with that pain and carry it in me and with me." It was then, in the midst of her describing her tense relationship with Lebanon—somewhere in between her saying, “They have robbed me of my country, they have failed me,” and her reiterating that her career “has never been about the money but about being successful”—that I realize how much this early wound has shaped Mardinian’s philosophy of life. It seems as if being successful is a patriotic duty for Mardinian, to serve as proof that failure does have an alternative, “I want to be a role model for those younger than me,” she says, and that’s perhaps the best note I could have wished for in terms of an end to my conversation with Mardinian—as she’d probably say, “End of story. Full stop.”
with nearly 40 years of experience in the hospitality world, Naim Maadad, founder and CEO of Gates Hospitality, is well worth listening to if you are seeking sound advice to make it through the ongoing difficult period in the industry at large.

In 2010, Maadad established Gates Hospitality, a UAE-headquartered hospitality company whose development of world-class concepts that have an international presence has given its founder a bird’s-eye view of the different approaches nations around the world have been undertaking to help their respective business communities overcome challenges stemming from the COVID-19 crisis. “In some countries, we have seen an extremely whole-hearted support from the government authorities, with banks holding off on payments for licenses, mortgages, or any changes in fees in order to help businesses survive the wave, and surf through with relatively less challenges,” he explains. “Ideally, what I would like to see is for financial institutions, banks, institutional providers, landlords, aggregators, and ministries to chip in with their bit to make sure that the burden is shared equally by all stakeholders, and that the plans are mitigated for all sectors to unite and fight this challenge for sheer survival in the long run.”

Zooming in onto Gates Hospitality—an umbrella group for some of the GCC’s most popular hospitality ventures from Ultra brasserie, Bistro des Arts, Reform Social & Grill, Publique and Folly by Nick & Scott, to Six Senses Zighy Bay—Maadad is pleased that being agile during difficult times has served them well. “We have associated our brand Folly by Nick & Scott to have our presence through the WORKSHOP venue at the Time Out Market Dubai commencing soon at Souk Al Bahar in Downtown,” he says. “Gates Hospitality has also secured advisory management roles in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as Ethiopia for projects involving hotels, spas, and F&B venues, and we would be actively sharing our expertise in concept development, brand definition and operational launch. We would continue to realign our current business plans, and keep on adapting to the changing business environment under the pandemic restrictions. We wholeheartedly support the authorities and their directives and regulations, and truly understand the circumstances in which these are required.”

Maadad admits that the demographic profile in the industry has been changing for the last two years, but explains that the pandemic has accelerated the change further in the last twelve months. “This time around, the change has been across all industries and not just restricted to food and beverage sector,” he says. “I foresee this trend continuing till the vaccination efforts bring a curb to the spread and bring a conclusion to this rising medical challenge. However, in the UAE, the new visa rules and regulations and the Expo 2020 commencing later this year will certainly bring an influx of a higher calibre demographic clients to Dubai in the times ahead. So, I remain very optimistic.”

When looking at things from the customer’s point of view, Maadad believes that the coronavirus pandemic has not changed behavioral patterns permanently, and that humankind will bounce back to being social in the times ahead. “How quickly this happens is uncertain, and the longer it takes, the higher the probability of the delay in returning to normal,” he adds. “Faster the vaccine implementation, the speedier will be the normalization realization be. I would like to hugely commend the UAE government authorities and the medical professionals for their determination in supporting the vaccination drive.” However, the pandemic has certainly fast-forwarded the arrival of the delivery model, Maadad adds. “People do not want to take the risk of leaving the comforts of their homes if there is an opportunity, so the convenience factor cannot be ignored,” he says. “Having said this, I am personally worried at the damage that this model will cause considering the high turnover, complete commercial focus, and very limited integrity on the branding.”

Maadad, however, is doubling down on his brand. The Gates Hospitality team recently developed the GatesWay app in an attempt to build a closer relationship and inspire loyalty with the clientele they serve. “Each of our venues can now directly reach their clients, so this is a way to thank them for their support,” he says. “All the promotions, activations and collaborations directly benefit the users. It is a value addition initiative. As soon as the members sign in, they automatically qualify to points, which are added and can be used at any of the venues within the group. What we aim to give is a total experience through the app, and not an address collection gimmick with pure commercial focus.” This also signifies Maadad’s thought process when it comes to the future of his enterprise, given that he says Gates Hospitality will be focusing on consolidation, complete commercial focus, and whole-hearted support from the government authorities, with banks holding off on payments for licenses, mortgages, or any changes in fees in order to help businesses survive the wave, and surf through with relatively less challenges, he explains. “Ideally, what I would like to see is for financial institutions, banks, institutional providers, landlords, aggregators, and ministries to chip in with their bit to make sure that the burden is shared equally by all stakeholders, and that the plans are mitigated for all sectors to unite and fight this challenge for sheer survival in the long run.”

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STRONGER TOGETHER | NAIM MAADAD, FOUNDER AND CEO, GATES HOSPITALITY

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Crafting a local narrative

25HOURS FOUNDER AND CEO CHRISTOPH HOFFMANN REVEALS DETAILS ABOUT HIS ENTERPRISE’S UPCOMING DUBAI HOTEL, WHILE ALSO EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF THE BOHEMIAN BRAND

by DEVINA DIVECHA

"We would not have Dubai without Accor.”

The relationship between Accor and 25hours has been fruitful from the start. Proof of its success includes the Q4 2021 opening of the 25hours Hotel One Central in Dubai, which will mark the brand’s first opening outside of Europe. “I realized how fruitful this collaboration [with Accor] can be because we would not have Dubai without Accor,” Hoffmann says. “We have learned a lot from each other. I’m self-confident enough to say that 25hours also made Accor even more aware of how important the lifestyle segment can be for their own company.”

While Accor did acquire other lifestyle-focused brands such as Mama Shelter and sbe, 25hours was one of the earlier investments into the segment, and Hoffmann remains cognizant of that. “Ennismore and Accor will create one of the largest lifestyle platforms in the world, and we will play a not unimportant role in that,” he adds. “That makes me proud.”

Accor is placing its bets on the lifestyle category over the next few years, with the number of its lifestyle hotel openings expected to triple by 2023. To top that, Accor’s lifestyle segment currently accounts for roughly 9% of the group’s annual revenue, while representing 25% of the company’s development pipeline by value. A recently announced joint venture with Ennismore, expected to close in the second quarter of 2021, will only add to Accor’s lifestyle muscle. Once complete, the deal will bring together a portfolio of lifestyle brands, including The Hoxton, Gleneagles, Delano, SLS, Mondrian, SO/ Hyde, Mama Shelter, 25h, 21c Museum Hotels, TRIBE, JO&JOE, and Working From.

An important part of Accor’s lifestyle ambitions is 25hours, which it owns a 50% stake in at the moment, and part of the Ennismore strategy is to eventually buy out the brand in its entirety. Under the leadership of Ennismore’s co-CEOs Sharan Pasricha and Gaurav Bhushan, each brand will retain its culture and purpose, supported by dedicated teams and with the full support of their founder. In this case, that of Christoph Hoffmann, who is also the CEO of 25hours.

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An important part of Accor’s lifestyle ambitions is 25hours, which it owns a 50% stake in at the moment, and part of the Ennismore strategy is to eventually buy out the brand in its entirety. Under the leadership of Ennismore’s co-CEOs Sharan Pasricha and Gaurav Bhushan, each brand will retain its culture and purpose, supported by dedicated teams and with the full support of their founder. In this case, that of Christoph Hoffmann, who is also the CEO of 25hours.

"We would not have Dubai without Accor.”

The relationship between Accor and 25hours has been fruitful from the start. Proof of its success includes the Q4 2021 opening of the 25hours Hotel One Central in Dubai, which will mark the brand’s first opening outside of Europe. “I realized how fruitful this collaboration [with Accor] can be because we would not have Dubai without Accor,” Hoffmann says. “We have learned a lot from each other. I’m self-confident enough to say that 25hours also made Accor even more aware of how important the lifestyle segment can be for their own company.”

While Accor did acquire other lifestyle-focused brands such as Mama Shelter and sbe, 25hours was one of the earlier investments into the segment, and Hoffmann remains cognizant of that. “Ennismore and Accor will create one of the largest lifestyle platforms in the world, and we will play a not unimportant role in that,” he adds. “That makes me proud.”
Currently, Hoffmann has a lot on his plate with openings, signings, and developments earmarked for 2021—all of which have dealt with the challenges by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. A 25Hours hotel in Florence, Italy, is set to open in summer 2021, followed by the Dubai project in September. There are two hotels in the works for Copenhagen, with one set to open early 2022. Melbourne and Sydney will mark the brand’s Australian debut, and they will open approximately in the next two years. He also reveals the brand is about to sign a hotel in Helsinki, Finland.

Dubai has been on the cards for a few years, and it’s time for it to come to fruition. Hoffmann says that the project might be among the “most interesting” for 25Hours now, because it will be a learning experience with the new Ennismore lifestyle team emerging from the wings. He is all praise for the new property, which is located in Dubai’s One Central complex. “I was impressed by the sheer size; it’s by far the largest 25Hours hotel [so far],” he adds. “I was also impressed with the quality of the hardware and the finishes,” he adds. All seems well for the September 2021 opening, and Hoffmann stresses that all public spaces and F&B outlets will be open then, mentioning the desire to start “full force” ahead of Expo 2020 Dubai, which is due to launch in October.

The hotel, whose tagline says it will weave “the tales of nomadic peoples into a creative and contemporary narrative,” will offer 434 rooms that are a nod to the local heritage and culture of the UAE. The room types include Bedouin and Glamping, while the suite classifications are Farm Stay, Artist Village and Hakawati Suite. The hotel will also serve up signature F&B outlets, including the well-known Monkey Bar, which first launched to much acclaim in Berlin.

A key feature of the property will be the “co-lax” spaces, which will be the brand's version of co-working—all though Hoffmann mentions here that he is not a fan of that word. “I prefer to look at it from a different point of view,” he explains. “I’ve previously mentioned the idea of becoming ‘radical local,’ and there is no other hotel within 25Hours like Dubai that can play that role seamlessly. Dubai is such a special place, and it is a market where everybody who lives there is on a search to find the third space… to find the living room of Dubai, to find a place where you can hang around the whole day, where you can work, communicate, network, eat and drink, and enjoy your stay.”

“That's why we say the Extra Hour Lab as a multi-competence think-tank unit,” which worked as a creative hub dealing with what influences the guest experience and the brand. From design through to conceptual work, storytelling, and more, the Extra Hour Lab was there to innovate—“but this concept has gone through some changes recently.” Due to the pandemic, we have changed a few things; there is no such thing as the Extra Hour Lab anymore,” Hoffmann reveals. “We’ve realized that our head office structure in Hamburg is more or less the Extra Hour Lab, so the focus right now is to change our head office more and more into an entity which focuses—especially now with the collaboration with Ennismore—on innovation, creation, concepting, on the brand as such. We don’t see ourselves in the future as an operational head office, but more as a conceptional one.

The Extra Hour Lab may have been the first step in some things, but it will become a concept organization.” Hoffmann adds, “Innovation only works in our organization once we have a project in hand. Without having a product, we would not be forced to stay innovative.” It’s not possible, he points out, to just put people in a room and tell them to create something. “We tried that,” he reveals honestly. “But it’s really hard to create something out of nothing.” While it may be defunct now, the Extra Hour Lab is still the reason for a few features that will be seen in the Dubai property, such as the MINI cinema in collaboration with Cinema Akil, and the design of the lobby ceiling that will be a design nod to the nomadic culture. All these circles back also to the brand’s ethos of catering to the local resident as much as, if not more than, the tourist. In fact, Hoffmann concedes that the brand is doubling down on its philosophy of being as local as possible. “The traveler who comes to our hotel in the future will appreciate the localness of our product,” he declares. “The public space is created to cater to the local market.”
TOO GOOD TO LEAVE

RIXOS FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN FETTAH TAMINCE
EXPLAINS WHY GUESTS WANTED TO STAY AT HIS HOTELS—EVEN IN THE MIDDLE OF A PANDEMIC

BY MEGHA MERANI

Y ou know you’re doing something really right in the hospitality business when a customer checks in and doesn’t leave throughout the year of the worst pandemic in modern history. Even as the COVID-19 crisis crippled the global hospitality industry, leaving millions of hotel rooms empty and causing many hotels to temporarily halt operations, Rixos Hotels had some of its properties busy and running throughout the outbreak, despite travel restrictions and country-wide lockdowns. “We had many guests who just didn’t want to leave,” says Fettah Tamince, founder and Chairman of Rixos Hotels, part of the Accor portfolio. “Why would they? They are safe [in the hotel]... their hometown is not safer than what we offer, [so] they made us their home. We have a guest who checked in last February, and hasn’t left since.”

Now, of course, his customers come from means that make it possible to foot a year-long hotel bill, but Tamince points out that the fact that they choose to stay with Rixos over anywhere else is because of their loyalty and trust in the brand. Because at its heart, Rixos embodies the traditional values that anyone who has been to Turkey will instantly recognize: hospitality that is personal and deeply genuine. “I don’t call them [guests] customers,” Tamince explains. “We are a family... But then imagine you are in a family where you are sure your chef is on top of his job in terms of your safety, the engineer is making sure you have fresh air, your gardener is doing the best work, security is making sure no one bothers you, and doctors are making sure your health is okay and monitoring that everything around you is done in a very careful way... that’s called service!”

Tamince says his family of guests includes members who have routinely been staying at Rixos properties for more than 20 years. “We have one million guests who spend their holidays [with us] and are very loyal to us,” he says. “But trust and loyalty is so important now, much more than before. You have to be on top of your business. It’s very competitive, because we are in markets where the growth of supply is double digit. You have to be innovative on your product and concept, and building a community. You can’t just fight on price.”

And within the community, Tamince says his guests have been reaching out to him directly with their concerns and seeking reassurance before they travel. “I have been personally approached by a lot of guests through my Instagram and my email,” he says. “They ask about our procedures, and whether the hotel is safe. They want to know if it’s safe to bring their kids. They ask if I’m traveling with my kids to those properties. I had a lot of questions that I personally answered to assure them that we had everything in place, and that we will be very careful to look after them and their loved ones.”

As part of COVID-19 safety precautions, Rixos put an in-house healthcare system in place, and it also introduced its own comprehensive and stringent pre-screening procedures for all visitors. At the same time, Tamince says he was concerned about ensuring the Rixos experience wasn’t overshadowed by rules and restrictions—an important balancing act to strike in these days. “I made sure my team understood that the guests are coming to us after a very tough time,” he explains. “It’s likely the first time they’re traveling [since the pandemic], so while we do have restrictions and procedures to follow, we also need to make sure they don’t feel overwhelmed. We need to give them the full Rixos atmosphere and experience, so they forget about what they went through over the last 10 months.”

Part of creating that experience has involved enhancing the brand’s all-inclusive concept. “All inclusive doesn’t mean just free drinks and food,” Tamince says. “We provide the best experiences when it comes to entertainment, sports, and activities for kids—and this has been our biggest advantage.” Indeed, guests across Rixos properties have been welcomed back with meaningful entertainment lineups especially for children including edutainment programs, new food and beverage concepts with a health-oriented focus, as well as a long list of health, wellness and sports activities.

The brand has also partnered with ballet and dance schools, football academies, yoga centres, culinary institutes and more to develop its programming for both adults and children. “I have four kids, and I know when you go on vacation, you don’t want your kids to waste their time,” Tamince says. “You want them to learn something to improve their skills but at the same time to also have fun.”

Fun for the entire family was also the intention behind Rixos’ theme park, The Land of Legends. The biggest leisure and entertainment park in Turkey—a joint venture by Rixos Hotels, Emaar Properties PJSC and Dragone Productions—opened in Belek, Antalya, in 2018, and Tamince now has plans to develop more worldwide. The Land of Legends’ original and purpose created concepts, themes, designs, and characters are the work of renowned entertainment mastermind, Franco Dragone.
With The Land of Legends, I believe I am introducing something new to the world," Tamince says. While he declined to divulge whether plans for a park in the UAE are in the works, Tamince confirmed that a Middle East location is definitely on the cards.

"There is no one where we are copying or going after," he adds, when asked if his concept is similar to Disney’s hotel and theme park packages. Looking ahead to a future after the pandemic, Tamince says he believes hotels will need to focus much more on creating new experiences, proximity to nature, and outdoor activities. "I think guests will now want to experience more of the outdoors, as part of, or close, to their indoor spaces. “You can have the best room, but [after the pandemic], people want to see a garden and trees, be able to walk on grass, hear the sound of birds, dine or drink outside, have space to play sports, and definitely have better activities for their kids,” Tamince declares. “How I describe my concept is that ‘I have all experiences outside, with some rooms.’”

Tamince’s approach definitely appears to have paid off so far. He says Rixos is perhaps one of the handful of hotel groups in the world that closed the year with a profit, albeit generating only a third of its annual revenue. In Dubai, he notes that business has been “very good” since December last year, attributing the pickup to the government’s exemplary handling of the pandemic.

Dubai did [anything] wrong,” he insists. “They managed everything very well from day one, and are monitoring things very well. As operators, we are witnessing this everyday.”

Looking back at the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Tamince remembers that during the first weeks of lockdown, his initial reaction was one of shock. “I talked to all my senior management, and told them that we are going to face a tough time, and we should be prepared for the worst,” he recalls. “And we did prepare ourselves for the absolute worst, but thankfully we didn’t get to that.”

But seeing the empty lobbies and rooms around the world was very sad—and it wasn’t just financially disappointing, he adds. “Everyone was worried about their health, and the health of their loved ones, about work, about the future. It was not an easy time.”

And being a leader came with a lot of sleepless nights, Tamince admits. “You think of the worst cases,” he shares. “You worry about your staff members getting infected, about your family and theirs... You think about food supply, you think about access to healthcare, you think about security... There are so many things you think before your business, your revenue or your hotels that leave you sleepless.”

But then, one night about two weeks into the lockdown, Tamince decided to switch back to action mode. “The next day, I woke up all my team, and I told them let’s not waste time,” he says.

“Let’s not worry about what’s going to happen to us, and what’s going to happen to the world. Let’s look at this time in a different way. What can we do during lockdown?”

The first thing to do, he told his team, was for each of them to choose how they wanted to improve themselves. “I told them, for example, if you speak one language learn a second,” he says. “If you cook 10 recipes, learn an elephant. If you are growing five vegetables or trees or flowers in the hotel gardens or your own, plan another two. I called my spa team and told them to find the best new music for their spas, find the best new oils, look at new therapies and training that they never had a chance to when they were busy... And we also decided to do some very quick renovations that we never found the chance to do, because we used to run at 90% to 95% occupancy.”

One of Tamince’s most cutting pieces of advice to his team, however, was to tell them to “stop making Netflix richer.” “People had started to say they slept at six in the morning,” he says, exasperatedly. “Why? Because they watched five movies, one after another.” So, what did Tamince do? “I told them it’s not going to help them, and to use this time to come out like athletes who have trained for a big run- and that’s what’s happened,” he declares, proudly. 

“You can have the best room, but [after the pandemic], people want to see a garden and trees, be able to walk on grass, hear the sound of birds, dine or drink outside, have space to play sports, and definitely have better activities for their kids.”

"YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST ROOM, BUT [AFTER THE PANDEMIC], PEOPLE WANT TO SEE A GARDEN AND TREES, BE ABLE TO WALK ON GRASS, HEAR THE SOUND OF BIRDS, DINE OR DRINK OUTSIDE, HAVE SPACE TO PLAY SPORTS, AND DEFINITELY HAVE BETTER ACTIVITIES FOR THEIR KIDS."
The French hospitality player is now setting its sights on the Middle East by TAMARA PUPIC

With its offerings in the events, restaurants, and festive activity sectors, the Paris Society Group has been long known as one of the key players in France’s hospitality sector, and now, the brand’s signature style of entertainment is being brought to the Middle East. “Paris Society has targeted Dubai as a priority destination for its development abroad,” says CEO Sebastien Pacault. “We have already started working on the export of our strongest brands in the coming months.”

The expansion of the Paris Society Group into the Middle East is the result of its alliance with another leader in the hospitality sector: Accor. According to Pacault, the partnership has proved to be a real springboard for his company’s growth and development. “Accor is already present all over the world, so this support has allowed us to enter a new phase in our evolution with development abroad, notably in Dubai and London.”

Founded in 2008 by French entrepreneur Laurent de Goucuff, Paris Society has become a leading name in the events, hospitality, and entertainment domains in France, with Pacault revealing that it has a turnover of over EUR150 million and more than 1,200 employees prior to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. “The Paris Society Group is developed around three pillars,” Pacault says. “The first is CLUBS, the heart and soul of Parisian nightlife with emblematic establishments like Raspoutine and Chez Castel. These include clubs with strong identities, driven by a real artistic direction, but also, open-air concert venues such as La Clairière and Bagatelle, in the heart of the Bois de Boulogne.”

“The second is TABLES, our exceptional restaurants where nothing is left to chance,” he continues. “We make each restaurant a place to live, by offering a private atmosphere, a perfect service and an amazing cuisine that can be found nowhere else—think Monsieur Bleu, Girafe, Apicius, Mun. Finally, we have PLACES, which is a unique portfolio of event venues. It is a catalog of iconic and exclusive venues, from breathtaking rooftops to Le Château de Longchamp in the Bois de Boulogne, from emblematic clubs to exceptional spaces hidden within Parisian museums.”

“All of what Paris Society offers can be drawn down to a singular theme, Pacault adds. “We are the pioneers of the French lifestyle,” he explains. “Hospitality is the value that best sums up our DNA: a blend of generosity, kindness, and cordiality in the way we welcome and treat our guests. The Group is driven by this ambition, to reinvent the art of hospitality. We are passionate and surrounded by the most motivated individuals; our collaborators are the best in their field, visionaries that are daring and engaged. From our chefs to our managers, we all share one ambition: to offer the best... Surprising locations, breathtaking views, hidden treasures; we select them always with the will to create unique experiences for our clients.”

Paris Society currently operates in France, particularly in Paris, but also in Saint-Tropez and Marseille, with Pacault adding that openings are also being planned in Megève, Courchevel and Val d’Hèrè. In terms of its presence outside of France, Paris Society has opened its first restaurant in London called Louie, while its Raspoutine club now has outposts in Marrakesh, Rome, and Los Angeles. Pacault reveals here that it will soon be opening up a location in Miami as well. “We don’t follow the trend, we create it,” Pacault declares. “Every day, we try to bring a new vision of the hospitality sector by creating new experiences.”

That said, Pacault admits that Paris Society’s ambitions have faced significant hurdles owing to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. “The coronavirus pandemic did cause the closure of Paris Society’s establishments, but it also allows us to reflect on this unprecedented situation has allowed him and his team to refine their development strategy as well. “We remain optimistic, and we are getting ready for the recovery,” he says. “Our opening plans are still on track, as is our development in France and abroad; our teams remain involved. After this crisis, people will want to get together and celebrate life, and this is exactly what we will give to them.”

According to Pacault, it is Paris Society’s desire to develop some of its finest brands in the cities that are making a difference that is going to keep it a thriving business in the long run. “Our success is based on the experience we provide to our customers,” he concludes. “We are creative, and we must stay creative to remain a trendsetter. Our goal is to promote the French art of hospitality that we embody, and make Paris Society a global hospitality leader.”
FOUNDED IN 2008 in Paris, Mama Shelter set out to create hotel destinations around a very particular philosophy: to build establishments in locations that tell a distinctive story to the world. This mission has resulted in what is today a brand boasting of 1,672 rooms, 13 restaurants, six rooftops, three co-working spaces, and over 1,100 employees in 13 cities and seven countries. With its outposts now in Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, Belgrade, Prague, Toulouse, London, Lille, and Luxembourg, Mama Shelter has been clearly finding favor for its offering. Explaining the brand’s allure, Mama Shelter co-founder and Director General Jérémie Trigano says, “Mama Shelter is a place where you can revel in new encounters, a real urban hideaway—which is not only full of life, but [is also] modern, warm, and sexy. You can curl up on our sofas and enjoy sharing our generous dishes, sip our delicious homemade cocktails, while listening to a live concert, or simply relax and sleep like a baby after watching a free blockbuster movie in your room... Mama takes care of everything!”

Behind the Mama Shelter brand is a family whose expertise in the hospitality sector spans generations. “It is a family affair, and I guess, hospitality runs through my veins and my genes,” Trigano says, and yes, he does have the evidence to back that assertion up. Kicking off his family’s interests in this sector was his great grandfather, Raymond Trigano, who, in the 1940s, launched a company specializing in the distribution of camping and sports equipment. His grandfather, Gilbert Trigano, co-founded Club Méditerranée with Gerard Blitz in the 1950s, which grew to become a renowned international travel and tourism operator specializing in all-inclusive holidays. Finally, his father, Serge Trigano, and his brother, Benjamin Trigano, are his co-founders for Mama Shelter—so, this is clearly a business that’s definitely got a close-knit family at the heart of it, and it does seem like guests are very receptive to its particular ethos. “Guests who pick Mama choose us because we offer a journey within a journey,” Trigano says. “Unlike other so-called lifestyle hotels, Mama is popular and for everyone.”

As an enterprise that transforms real estate assets into what Trigano calls “magical hospitality destinations” that fit the expectations of today’s urban business and leisure travelers, Mama Shelter has managed to create a diverse following from around the world. “We like to say we are a crossroads for people of all ages, countries, cultures, creativities, and ethnic backgrounds,” Trigano says. “Thanks to our destination restaurants and our artistic programs, we are deeply rooted in the local community, offering travelers the opportunity to mingle with the locals.” According to Trigano, Mama Shelter was one of the first lifestyle brands in Europe to create such an offering for travelers, and this has certainly worked out to its favor. “The success of Mama has been the fruit of the labors of a tribe of founders and of amazing men and women—architects, designers, artists, chefs, [and] staff— who joined us since the first opening in 2008: the Mama Gang!”

A FAMIL Y AFFAIR/ M A MA SHEL T E R

The Paris-born, family-run brand is all set to bring its unique offering to the Middle East’s hospitality landscape BY PAMELLA DE LEON

“We are deeply rooted in the local community, offering travelers the opportunity to mingle with the locals.”

Lifestyle/ Legends

Opposite page, left to right: Benjamin, Serge and Jérémie Trigano, co-founders, Mama Shelter
In 2014, global hotel operator AccorHotels acquired a 35% stake in the company, signaling the start of an era of accelerated growth for the brand. “Like everything at Mama, the relationship started with an interaction,” Trigano says, as he recalls how his father, brother, and himself met Accor Chairman and CEO Sebastien Bazin in 2014. “Sebastien knew there were no lifestyle brands in Accor’s portfolio, and that the lifestyle segment was growing.” Though the Trigano family were initially hesitant of being part of a major hotel group, they also knew they needed the help of an industrial partner to grow. But after meeting Bazin “over a delicious bowl of pasta cooked by my mom,” the family grew to be more confident about the proposed partnership: “We loved the man and his vision!”

With a robust partner now onboard, Mama Shelter has been eyeing up further development, and the Middle East is figuring heavily in its plans for the future. Trigano says that his enterprise currently has nine hotels in the pipeline, including two in the Middle East, namely in Dubai and Bahrain. “Branching out in the Middle East was obvious and strategically needed for the global buildup of the brand, but also because of the absence of similar concepts in the region,” he says. “This part of the world is one of our key pillars for the years to come, and we truly believe that our lifestyle offering will be a perfect match to the region’s expectations. Nothing comparable to Mama exists for now, and we want to be the first [one] to tap into the lifestyle segment there.”

Much like every other entity within the hospitality space, Mama Shelter has also been negatively affected by the coronavirus pandemic that struck in 2020. “This crisis has probably hit us harder, as the foundation of our concept is based on human interaction,” says Trigano. Though many of its properties are still closed due to governmental guidelines, the Mama Shelter team remain thankful for the support of their partners. “We will survive this difficult period, and we’ll probably come out stronger, as we have been taking this time to improve our offering. We are convinced our guests will, more than ever, want to gather in destinations like Mama once we can reopen fully.” As such, Trigano remains bullish about Mama Shelter’s future. “Mama Shelter has a bright path in front of it,” he says. “We have 13 hotels operating, nine in the works, and 10 under negotiations. My dream as an entrepreneur is to see Mama continue to grow and lead in the midscale lifestyle market, and enter the luxury and economic market successfully as well.”

IN FOCUS
MAMA SHELTER CO-FOUNDER JÉRÉMIE TRIGANO’S TIPS FOR HOSPITALITY BUSINESSES
1. Keep a tab on your team “Trust does not exclude control. It is always good to check your team’s work, and control macro-management with micro-management.”
2. The devil is in the detail “Pay attention to detail. Our job is to make sure everyone is happy, and that everything is perfect.”
3. Hard work gets it done “Work hard; this industry is 24/7. Adapt yourself (as) competition is fierce, and tastes are changing daily; you need to be creative and bold to keep up with the pace.”
4. Trust your gut “Follow your instincts. Too many decision-makers can lead to the wrong decision, so if your gut tells you to do it, do it.”

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The phrase “unperturbed hotelier” may sound like an oxymoron in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic, but it perfectly fits the description of Alan Faena. That’s because, even as the global hotel industry has experienced its most devastating year in history, his latest deal is a dream come true.

The Argentine entrepreneur, famous for his pioneering hotel projects in Miami and Buenos Aires, has signed a partnership with international hospital- ity conglomerate Accor to grow his brand—from two resorts, to around a dozen worldwide, including in Dubai where he’s currently planning his largest and most ambitious luxury development.

“This partnership goes beyond the pandemic,” says Faena, the visionary fashion designer-turned-property developer and founder of the Faena Group. “I began talking to Accor a year before the pandemic began, and I found the perfect partner to expand worldwide. It has always been our dream to share the Faena ethos and artistic vision around the globe, and with Accor, we are turning this dream into reality.”

Faena’s small but powerful foothold as a global leader in luxury lifestyle is well established. Condé Nast Traveler’s 2020 Readers Choice Awards named Faena District Miami Beach the #1 hotel in Miami and #2 hotel in the wider United States, and the twelfth highest ranked property in the world, while Faena Buenos Aires was listed among the top 20 best hotels in South America.

As a part of the new venture, Accor, the largest hospitality company in Europe and the sixth-largest worldwide with nearly 5,000 hotels across 110 countries, will now manage the brand’s bestselling properties. Faena will work in partnership with Accor to break new ground, developing Faena Districts in select destinations, a move that is expected to become a catalyst for exponential growth owing to the artist’s deeply personal and distinctive avant-garde approach.

The Districts, a real-estate concept that he first originated in Buenos Aires and later imported to Miami, are one-of-a-kind holistic environments anchored in inspiring cultural experiences, which integrate luxury residences and hotels, celebrated epicurean concepts, original experiential retail, wellness and healing, soulful entertainment and cutting-edge interdisciplinary art.

Faena’s multi-award-winning Faena Districts are internationally renowned for shifting the gravitational center of cities, expanding their social footprint and becoming new cultural epicenters. The concept is renowned, for example, for transforming Miami’s mid-beach neighborhood’s faded hotels and condominiums into a thriving cultural hub. The multi-award-winning US$1.2 billion six-block district is anchored by the 169-room Faena Hotel. The property’s Art Deco theatrical aesthetic in high Gatsby style was conceived by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Baz Luhrmann and his wife Catherine Martin, an Academy Award-winning costume designer. ...
With hotels now scrambling to adapt or rework existing projects to evolve with the realities of the public health crisis, Faena’s timeline holds the advantage of building with an eye on the future of tourism. Its Dubai development, co-financed with Accor and set to be bigger than its landmark Miami location, is expected to open doors in 2023. “As Faena expands, we plan to continue rethinking hospitality lifestyle and shaping the path for groundbreaking concepts, setting new industry standards in the creation of inimitable environments rooted in culture, positively transforming cities, shifting old paradigms and becoming new international cultural epicenters,” the founder adds.

With the city’s penchant and reputation for all things luxurious, it’s no surprise that Dubai is top on the list for Faena’s next project. Frequented by celebrities like Beyoncé and Rihanna, Faena’s hotels boast frills like a butler service for every guest, and various other innovative experiences to satisfy the lavish travel expectations of the affluent, crafted in collaboration with a collection of artists, designers and architects including the likes of Philippe Starck, Rem Koolhaas, Norman Foster and Damien Hirst.

With experience across a wide range of industries including hospitality, entertainment, art, fashion and real estate, Faena says he looks at each development as a unique combination of art, lifestyle, technology, service, nature and sustainability. “Dubai is a unique place, with similarities to Miami, with the atmosphere, the weather, business and culture,” Faena says. “I believe Dubai is a city that has been evolving and transforming for the last decade, and I am interested to bring the Faena way of doing things to such a vibrant city that continues to change and evolve.”

At this point, it’s worth noting that the Gulf region’s hospitality sector is heavily dominated by luxury, and Dubai has spent a greater part of the past decade promoting itself as a top luxury destination. But when asked if this would affect his brand’s standing in the market here, Faena was quick to dismiss that notion. “We do not compare ourselves with others in hospitality,” he declares. “We are unique, and we have our own voice.”

“WE PLAN TO CONTINUE RETHINKING HOSPITALITY LIFESTYLE AND SHAPING THE PATH FOR GROUNDBREAKING CONCEPTS, SETTING NEW INDUSTRY STANDARDS IN THE CREATION OF INIMITABLE ENVIRONMENTS ROOTED IN CULTURE, POSITIVELY TRANSFORMING CITIES.”
A partner at a global private equity firm. A professional racing driver. A founder and creator of a lifestyle app.

It is possible that each of these descriptions render images of three distinctly different individuals. For Omar Jackson, however, wearing all three hats at the same time seems to be a seamless process.

Private equity firm Berkeley Assets, headquartered in the British Virgin Islands, is a multi-asset company with a diversified portfolio of investments across several sectors for well over a decade now. One of the five key people in the firm’s global leadership team is Jackson, who has been designated as a partner responsible for developing Berkeley Asset’s global growth strategies for both existing and new markets.

While this corporate role can be considered as the Dubai-based British national’s day job, Jackson is also the founder of his eponymous lifestyle brand, OJ Lifestyle. Billed as “a disruptive force of passion and drive, designed to energize, thrill, and inspire,” it primarily aims to bring exciting offers from a plethora of lifestyle brands across the UAE to one accessible platform.

In a nutshell, the platform aims to cater to three main verticals: experiences, fashion, and social sustainability.

At face value, OJ Lifestyle may initially come across as yet another lifestyle-influencing brand, but look a little closer, and one will find the platform’s essence to be based off Jackson’s life experiences and lessons, which includes his humble beginnings in life, having been raised by a single mother. In fact, it seems like Jackson has incorporated the biggest turning points of his life into creating the brand. “I think I naturally had a fire in my belly, and a desire to have lots of things that I didn’t have growing up,” he says. “My mum worked very, very hard with the main priority of providing food and shelter, and to give my brother and me the best education she could. Witnessing what my mum did every day has a big part to play in who I’ve become today.”

In an era when our social media timelines are increasingly inundated with influencers and lifestyle gurus who flaunt the concept of a picture-perfect life, it is refreshing to listen to what Jackson believes is an ideal lifestyle- his personal viewpoint is largely the by-product of surviving a potentially life-ending allergy attack when he was 18.

“When I survived that, which I am thankful for, it gave me a different perspective on life- anything can happen any day, you have to live life to the fullest, and you have to do what you love to do,” Jackson says. “Which means living a lifestyle that means something to you as a person, because every person is different. Living a life that grants you the satisfaction that you want.”

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**The X Factor**

With his new app, X by OJ Lifestyle, Omar Jackson is getting ready to shake up the world of experiences.

By Aalia Mehreen Ahmed
The mentoring Jackson abounds to here is that which he received from two individuals he met when he was a teenager: Ash Shah and Mike Clark. Interestingly enough, all these years later, Shah and Clark are now his fellow partners at Berkeley Assets. “I was fortunate enough to have a couple of important mentors in my life, and both of those mentors are now my mentors at Berkeley Assets,” says Jackson. “I know the difference they made to me, and the guidance they gave me. If it weren’t for other people, I potentially may not be where I am today. So, I strive to always make a difference where I can. If my instinct tells me I should do something, then I’ll do it.”

This observation very neatly loops right back into why OJ Lifestyle was started in the first place. “The number one priority in life are experiences- that is the focus of OJ Lifestyle,” states Jackson. “You don’t get experiences by sitting down on your sofa at home- you get them by living and breathing, by being out and about. So, I want to drive people, utilizing technology and digital advances, towards an app called X.” Jackson explains that the X app helps users navigate their way through enticing offers from lifestyle brands in and around the UAE. Ranging from luxury experiences to daily necessities, the app is designed to help members redeem offers from lifestyle outlets such as restaurants, beach clubs, beauty salons, and other high-end experiences. This, in turn, leads to the accrual of “X points” in a given member’s personal membership account, which can be further used to avail any of OJ Lifestyle’s many events around the country, including live events.

Available for free download from both iOS and Android platforms, the membership costs AED699 for a period of 12 months. Perhaps surprisingly, the concept of social sustainability has been incorporated into the X app as well. By partnering with UAE-based non-profit charity Gulf For Good, which was founded under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the app aims to help children affected by COVID-19 by donating a small part of each sign-up to the cause. The prime focus, however, has been to encourage having more real-life, visceral experiences. But the idea of experiences itself changed with the arrival of the COVID-19 crisis last year. Live events were no longer viable, and Jackson and his team took the hit just like most businesses across the globe.

In fact, the firm was prepared to launch a gym called The BOX by OJ Lifestyle, powered by Amir Khan in November 2020. But with the onset of the pandemic, that was moved to a tentative May 2022 launch date. However, Jackson has taken this setback in stride, noting how part of OJ Lifestyle’s ethos is to also showcase the downsides of running a business, not just the ups. “Too many businesses set up, and you only hear about them when they’re successful, but you don’t hear about the struggles or hurdles they’ve had to face,” explains Jackson. “OJ Lifestyle is not about that. We’re about showing the trials and tribulations, the challenges, and how we’re going through it. That’s okay, it’s life! Sometimes it is out of your control, and it’s all about how you handle the setbacks as a team.”

During such times of uncertainty, it is perhaps quite rare to witness such clarity of thought and calmness, and Jackson attributes having these traits to his experiences as a professional racing driver. “With racing, it’s discipline, focus, staying calm under pressure, and the ability to deal with circumstances that you cannot plan for,” he elaborates. “All these things have had a massive contribution to who I am. I race professionally against Ferraris on international Formula One circuits where you’re one mistake away from a...
It’s a great time to be in the online F&B business, despite the number of players in the market. Dark kitchens or ghost kitchens—cooking facilities that produce food only for delivery with no dine-in or customer-facing areas—could create a US$1 trillion global opportunity by 2030, according to a Euromonitor virtual webinar presented by Euromonitor’s Global Food and Beverage Lead Michael Schaefer. The Middle East has also caught on to this trend, and data from RedSeer Consulting shows that the sector is becoming competitive, with more than 380 brands and over 70 kitchens present in the region. In the UAE alone, while the overall food service sector suffered during the pandemic’s ensuing lockdowns and is expected to post a loss in earnings of almost 40% by year-end compared to the previous year, there has been a net positive impact on the online channels of food delivery, reported RedSeer.

In this environment that Kitch-In is set to make its mark with its launch in Q2 of 2021. Built in partnership with Accor Group, Kitch-In is a digital platform that combines restaurants and brands endorsed by award-winning chefs, that will deliver high-quality food straight to customers’ homes. The platform has been created by restaurateur Evgeny Kuzin alongside well-known chef Izu Ani, both with impressive culinary pedigrees to their name. Backed by their knowledge of the market, the duo is set to make their mark on the online delivery market—and help a few hotels along the way. Commenting on the new venture, Kuzin says, “We are proud and excited to be partnering with Accor, one of the world’s leading hospitality enterprises, which allows us to provide exciting opportunities for in-room dining, as well as learn from the attained expertise of their knowledgeable and talented team.”

Kuzin adds, “Kitch-In will launch with four virtual brands in April, three legacy brands in May, and aims to add another 10 virtual brands by September 2021, covering a range of cuisines. Each kitchen can house at least 10 brands, and as the number of kitchens increases, so can the culinary offering, leading to an expected growth of 50 kitchens within the first year of operations.” Kitch-In’s ecosystem includes three components: the kitchens (which will include a research lab, as well as production and satellite kitchens), legacy brands of Kuzin’s Bulldozer Group along with digital-only concepts, and strategic partners including Accor Group and Careem. Kitch-In will have its own app, with user-friendly and attractive interfaces for both hotel guests and consumers. According to Kuzin, Kitch-In will enable Accor hotels to elevate in-room dining experiences, as well as offer consistent, excellent-quality cuisine to the wider community.

“Our goal is to simplify cooking, nutrition and sustainability by providing easy access to impeccable cuisine, prepared by an expert culinary team that meets nutritional requirements and reduces waste, at a reasonable price,” Kuzin explains.
To enable the creation of high-quality meals, the chef will have a solid team of chefs from Bulldozer Group to back him up: Shane Macneill, who launched Novikov Dubai and is currently the Executive Chef at Shanghai Me; Orestis Kotefas, the executive chef at Gaia; Aya Dubai’s sushi master Yukitaka Kitade; and Chris Blake, who has worked at Zuma Dubai and now is with Aya Dubai. Ani says, “Our culinary team have worked really hard to curate new menus for our digital brands, using their skills and understanding of culture, cuisine and ingredients. We have developed a thorough training and education system to help onboard new members of staff and maintain the same level of quality as we grow.”

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The platform will have a research lab, located in Dubai, and it will be an Accor kitchen staffed by the Bulldozer team. Everything from R&D, recipe and menu designs, quality management, standard operating procedures and training, will take place here. “I believe the best way to create an efficient and happy team, is to give them the time and space to train together, find their bearings and feel comfortable, especially when working with new technology,” Ani says.

Technology naturally plays a major role in the business model of the platform, which has been years in the making. Kuzin reveals that the last few years have been spent on working on the research and development for Kitch-In. “By studying, understanding and managing each aspect of the business chain, we maintain consistent quality control and ensure it is scalable,” Kuzin says. He continues, “We want to ensure that the platform services its community to their preference, so we have spent a lot of time researching market trends and consumer habits. We have also taken great care to ensure that the technology has the bandwidth to work to its full capacity, so that we can successfully manage the supply and demand.”

Expansion plans are ambitious, but Kuzin says that the scope of Kitch-In knows no bounds, and the clientele the team aims to reach is “truly limitless.” He says, “We plan to expand across the Middle East and Africa. In 2020, Kuzin landed in Dubai and launched Bulldozer Group. He imported internationally renowned brands including Concepts, IGA and Boiser. Eventually, Kuzin brought together expertise from across the venues to create homegrown concepts. Following the opening of nightclubs BASE, his focus turned to luxury restaurants and lifestyle brands including GMA and Shanghai Me, designed to be exported from Dubai to the world.

As Chief Research Officer and shareholder, Izu Ani will be responsible for lab kitchen quality management, menu development and training. After his time in the Michelin-starred restaurant, The Square in Mayfair, Ani moved to France to develop his Nouvelle cuisine experience. During his six-year tenure in France, he worked at a number of restaurants, including the two Michelin-starred La Faisolle and Le Cray and the three Michelin-starred Auberge de l’Ile. He then moved to Spain where he gained invaluable experience at renowned restaurants such as Azurmendi, Mugaritz and Akelarre. In 2020, he launched La Petite Maison in Dubai.
As the Director of Interior Design at Accor India, Middle East, Africa, and Turkey (IMEAT), Alexandra Woo of Accor has no problems in explaining the role design and décor play in ensuring a space’s appeal (and success), especially when it comes to the hospitality domain. “Hotels are like a dream that guests are willing to discover, entering and enjoying the world of crafted and surprising experiences, which we call an augmented reality,” she explains. “Space decoration is playing an essential role in influencing the mood and vibe; functionality and experience mapping designed for surprising the guest, making them feel special, and evoke their feelings.” These are the principles Woo herself has been using in partnership with talented designers from around the world, to create inspiring, innovative concepts for Accor brands like MGallery, Grand Mercure, and Novotel, all of which is meant to draw people in. According to Woo, guests today gravitate toward socially conscious spaces that have a great vibe around it, and as such, hotels, given the variety of functions they serve, be it as, say, an art gallery, or a co-working space, need to be showcased and presented in a manner that suits the occasion they may be being used for.

“Efficiency in design is important, because it allows getting most from the property, using every inch of the space as an opportunity to create a meaningful and discovering journey, filled with comfort and artful functionality,” Woo says. “We need to have a strong character reflected in the interior concept and décor, where storytelling is the basis of everything. In a nutshell, storytelling is the connection between ideas, curiosity, and spatial experience through construction methods. This connection is an attempt to create emotional meanings for the guest, while still embracing functionality and visual sensation. Inspired by travel, nature, architecture, fashion, graphic design, literature, and art, the most memorable interiors are created with passion and a fearless expression of fantasy, where materials and color combinations found randomly or by accident can create a fascinating blend. Indeed, to achieve balance, there must be a thoughtful mixology of texture, history, pattern, and color.”

This forms the basis of what can be constituted as Woo’s ethos in her role at Accor. “Good hotel design has no limitations,” she declares. “Every design shall be the craft, with its own story and connection to place, representing strong and diverse concepts of experiences. Every hotel is an invitation to embark on an unexpected and fascinating journey. The new knowledge that you capture and take with you is the important component of the memorable moments that will stay in guests’ souls, and they will share with their friends, telling a story they experienced in this place, and emotions they will never forget.”
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