THE REGION’S NEWEST UNICORN IS HERE

KITOPI
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO
MOHAMAD BALLOUT
“If a solution doesn’t exist, then build it.” P.18

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HB Investments’ seed investment fund and incubator, HB Angels, announces the launch of its first startup, Ketish, a luxury feminine wellness brand.

by ABY SAM THOMAS

The Region’s Newest Unicorn is Here

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by PAMELLA DE LEON

Success Story

Eventus co-founder and CEO Mai Medhat reflects on her decade-long entrepreneurial journey that’s led to her startup’s acquisition by Bevy, a US-based enterprise community event engine.

by TAMARA PUPIC

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Delegation vs. abdication

LET ME START WITH A DISCLAIMER: when it comes to leadership skills, I am especially bad at the art of delegation, wherein I often find myself overloaded with tasks just because I think, well, why should I bother someone else to do something, when I could just do it myself. The problem with this kind of thought process is that it will result in me probably getting overwhelmed and burnt out, or even just finding myself unable to do the tasks that I absolutely need to do, since I’ve bogged myself down with the minutiae that could have been taken care of by someone else on my team. The good thing here though is that this is an issue I have indeed identified in myself as a leader, and therefore, I’ve been trying -albeit with limited success- to get more comfortable with the idea of delegation.

Having said that, I’ve come to realize that there is a definite reason for my misgivings about delegation- and that’s perhaps because I’ve come across way too many people who abuse their ability to deputize on a day-to-day basis. They do this because they are in a position of power or privilege, and their abject laziness or apathetic attitudes allow them to simply dump work on those who work under them, not because they are too busy with other tasks or reasons of that nature, but just because they can. I’ve had first-hand experience working under bosses like this, and while I was too young, too afraid, and too inexperienced to call out this exploitation for what it was back then, I find myself angrily pointing out such abdications of responsibility when I see it around me now- and it’s also why I am hellbent on keeping myself in check when I am delegating to my team, perhaps almost to a fault.

After all, I remember too well feeling unhappy and disillusioned with the behavior of my managers then, and how that led me to leave those jobs eventually- and I’m keen on making sure I never let my people feel that way. “Delegating work works- provided the one delegating works too,” said Robert Half (founder of the California-headquartered talent solutions company that bears his name), and that’s something all of us—entrepreneurs included—would be wise to keep in mind, always.
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HB Investments’ seed investment fund and incubator, HB Angels, launches its first startup, *Ketish*, a luxury feminine wellness brand.

**Ketish**-named after the ancient Egyptian goddess of love, passion, sexuality, and pleasure Qetesh—aims to bring feminine and sexual wellness outside of the pharmacy, and make it a part of women’s self-love practice.
Founded by Emaan Abbass, who was formerly a product developer at Huda Beauty, Ketish aims to address a gap she found in the intimate care and feminine wellness industry, with the brand’s products having been developed by keeping women’s needs and desires on top of mind. The Ketish portfolio is made up of targeted body care and wellness products that are “super effective, multi-beneficial, and have that undeniable dope factor,” with Abbass revealing that the brand has been named after Qetesh, the ancient Egyptian goddess of love, passion, sexuality, and pleasure. “Although some feminine care products have always existed, I found they lacked credibility, or were just low-key embarrassing to purchase,” Abbass says. “We want to take feminine and sexual wellness outside of the pharmacy - a place that’s typically associated with something being wrong or feeling sick. We want to elevate that experience and make it a part of your self-love practice. The products are going to be luxurious and effective, and developed with wellness in mind. We’ve transformed feminine care products visually. We’ve made them really beautiful, like a little secret weapon inside your bag, so you never have to feel embarrassed or ashamed, when whipping it out on a date, or on an outing with some friends.”

HB Investments, the Dubai-based private investment office chaired by Huda Beauty founder Huda Kattan, has announced the launch of Ketish, a luxury feminine wellness brand, which is the first startup to come out of its seed fund and incubator, HB Angels.
In an interview with Entrepreneur Middle East, Abbass was emphatic about noting the key role HB Investments has played in getting Ketish off the ground as a business. In 2017, Kattan had announced on her social media channels that she was starting a US$10 million fund to invest in passionate founders with mission-driven business ideas, and that was the incentive Abbass needed to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams. “I always had an idea to start a feminine wellness brand, but never thought it out until I saw that video,” Abbass recalls. “I was nervous to approach Huda, not just because it was something that was so personal to me, and I wasn’t sure how she would receive it. I finally worked up the courage to approach Huda with the idea for Ketish. And after several post-pitch conversations, the family saw the vision really clearly, and decided to invest in Ketish.”

As a Egyptian American woman, Abbass was driven to launch Ketish after her own experiences in life in which feminine health and sex education were always considered as taboo topics at home. Having been diagnosed with cervical cancer caused by the human papillomavirus when she was 21, her fear of turning to her family for support or comfort led her to go through the nine-year healing process alone. “This experience made me realize just how important my intimate health was, and I become hyper-aware of the products I was using on my body,” Abbass explains. “I quickly realized that there was a gap when it came to taboo-free, trustworthy products in the intimate care space. I also went through this before the age of social media, and so, I felt that there weren’t enough educational platforms or outlets for young girls like myself to lean on for support. I thus wanted to create a brand that not only provided effective, luxurious, and powerful products that were free from stigma, but I also wanted to create the community and platform I wished I’d had throughout my journey.”

Abbass’ personal vision for the brand is also what led Kattan to decide that Ketish would be the first brand to come out of HB Investments’ HB Angels umbrella. “The purpose-driven brands that are here to change things in the industry and for consumers is where I want to be, and Emaan and Ketish represent this perfectly,” Kattan says. “Whenever we’re considering new investments, we always look for brands and entrepreneurs that have a similar vision to ours at HB Investments. We want founders that are passionate and have purpose for their brands- and Emaan definitely has that. Women don’t realize how important feminine health is. People still don’t feel comfortable shopping for tampons or pads, and it’s really bizarre, because something like this is human nature- so, why are all women so uncomfortable with it? Women are really holding themselves back, and it’s not fair. So many women struggle with a lot of health problems, and some are so unaware simply because they lack the education. This conversation has had so much shame and stigma around it, and it’s time to put a stop to it. Emaan has educated me a lot about how to take care of my feminine health, and now, it’s time for her and Ketish to share it with the world. I really am thrilled to be supporting and working with someone who is so driven. I’m so proud of her; she has really grown as a founder, a woman and a boss!”

With Ketish now having become the first enterprise to be backed by HB Angels, Kattan says the entity will be continuing to keep an eye out for new investments in the future. “We are in the process of incubating other brands as HB Angels, and investing in other founders,” Kattan says. “As part of HB Investments, we have made a few investments in the tech and consumer spaces with some amazing founders, where we’re obviously less involved than we are with our HB Angels arm. As for HB Angels, our in-house seed investment fund and incubator, it’s still a small portfolio that is growing slowly and organically. It’s important for us to find the right partners with a mission that we fully support and want to grow. Right now, we’re exploring partnerships around the world to invest in the right people.”

As a team, we felt it was important to take everyone’s sensitivities into consideration, yet still remain true to our mission and voice.
There are a lot of categories we’ve expressed interest in, we’ve spoken to a lot of different people, a lot of different founders, but we don’t want to just throw our money and time around. HB Angels is a partnership, and we want to be able to offer our expertise whether it’s branding, marketing, or social. I definitely see a lot of exciting partnerships coming our way.”

When asked about the characteristics of businesses she’s hoping to support through HB Investments and HB Angels, Kattan revealed a very particular feature she absolutely wants to see in the entrepreneurs and enterprises that she’d work with. “Hands down, the ‘human factor,’” she declares. “That’s so important to us at HB investments, which is also why we have to be super selective about our investments. We care so much about finding founders with the right kind of passion and purpose. When we look at investing in someone, it’s not always about how sexy the idea is. It’s about the founder. Does he/she have what it takes? Are they in this only for the money? Is this idea actually important to them? Like I said before, it’s a partnership, we are involved in almost every aspect, working side by side with them. They become part of the HB Investments family, so we don’t want someone who just wants our money and has an exit strategy. We look for people who are passionate, have purpose, and are driven to make their brand as successful as possible.”

For Abbass, working with HB Investments and HB Angels has allowed her and her brand to leverage the different resources that have been built into this particular ecosystem. An added perk, she notes, has been the ability to work closely with Kattan on this enterprise. “We are very fortunate to have a female investor backing us as a brand,” she says. “Huda has always understood and seen the Ketish vision so clearly. She has connected with it on a personal level, and she has supported us in action since day one. Huda and I have always had a very special relationship, but I do believe in the case of Ketish, our investor relationship is quite unique. I went from being a former employee to now a business partner and mentee, and throughout this experience of building the brand, our relationship has definitely transformed. Huda has given me invaluable advice based on her own first-hand experience, having to do with everything from business to marketing. She’s taught me the value of hard work, perseverance, and pure passion, because she embodies all of those attributes. Huda believes in celebrating and uplifting everyone around her, but especially women.”

But despite having her enterprise being backed by Kattan, Abbass admits that starting up Ketish wasn’t a bed of roses either. “One of the biggest challenges we’ve faced is simply navigating the sensitivities that exist around feminine and sexual wellness category, especially in the Middle East,” she says. “We’ve taken the time to talk to women from all over the world, but specifically in this region, in an effort to understand how women would receive a brand like Ketish. Each person we talked to had different reactions based on their own experiences, but one thing remained consistent across the board: that it’s time for women to have a brand like this, to feel empowered, get educated, hear other women’s stories, and to be a part of a bigger community. We know and understand that launching a brand like this will be met with some controversy, but the positive feedback we received really validated our ‘why.’ We are fully aware of how taboo these topics are, especially in the Middle East, and that they might not be received well by those who aren’t accustomed to them. But as a team, we felt it was important to take everyone’s sensitivities into consideration, yet still remain true to our mission and voice. We understand that in order to reach women, we need to communicate in a way that feels safe for those who want to be a part of the dialogue, both in public and in private. The topic of women’s health is too important to ignore anymore.”
“THE TOPIC OF WOMEN’S HEALTH IS TOO IMPORTANT TO IGNORE ANYMORE.”
THE REGION’S NEWEST UNICORN

KITOPI co-founder and CEO Mohamad Ballout is aiming to have his cloud kitchen platform dominate the region (and the world) with a US$415 million funding round led by SoftBank.

By PAMELLA DE LEON
IS HERE
With a mission of “satisfying the world’s appetite,” the enterprise founded by Mohamad Ballout, Saman Darkan, Bader Ataya, and Andres Arenas enables restaurants and F&B brands to scale their reach and open delivery-only locations by providing infrastructure and its own proprietary software with minimal overheads and time. Since its launched in 2018, Kitopi has seen its entity grow at a fast-paced rate—currently, it operates over 60 kitchens in UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, and works with more than 200 brands, including Shake Shack, KLC Virtual Restaurants, Luca, Papa Johns and iHOP. It has even diversified its offerings by utilizing its supply chain to include subscription-based meal plans and on-demand groceries delivery. And it’s interesting to see how the enterprise’s plans are further unfolding— in July this year, Kitopi announced that it has successfully raised $415 million in a Series C led by SoftBank Vision Fund 2, with the round also joined by Chimera, Abu Dhabi’s DisruptAD, Riley, Dogus Group, Next Play Capital, and Nordstar. Though valuation details remain undisclosed, a Bloomberg report noted that Kitopi had crossed the $1 billion valuation mark, which makes it the latest Middle East unicorn and the fastest one yet.

Having SoftBank Vision Fund 2 backing the enterprise is an achievement in itself, with it being the first investment made by the firm in a company homegrown in the UAE. “I think that with SoftBank coming in here, we’re the first of probably many more investments that they’re going to do, and other great investors coming in as well,” says Ballout. “It’s also great to see sovereign wealth funds jumping in to back homegrown concepts. You don’t see a lot of that happening, so that’s also something we’re proud of.” Kitopi is also lucky to have found investors that align with its vision, he adds. “It’s not a one-way street, and we’re fortunate to have the support of leading international and regional investors,” he says. “We were looking for long-term capital investors, and what was unique in SoftBank is their portfolio of phenomenal companies that we can build synergies with globally.” And the raise has also reinforced the Kitopi team’s thoughts on the venture’s immense potential and value. “I do think we ended up raising more than what we initially expected to raise,” Ballout says. “It definitely validates a lot of things—it validates Kitopi, and the team that Kitopi has. It validates the tech ecosystem in the MENA region, that there’s a lot of great companies over here. And it is the first, if I guess, of many more companies that are going to cross the billion-dollar-mark in the next two years.”
1. Keep it real.
“Be authentic and genuine—investors can see right through when you’ve not.”

2. It’s all about the numbers.
“Be unit economic obsessive—the days of growth at any cost are over.”

3. Trust the process.
“Build relationships with potential partners early on. It’s highly unlikely a new investor will invest a large sum of money when first meeting you—trust is built over time.”

4. Keep it simple.
“Simplify the problem you are solving in such a way that a 10-year-old can understand it.”

‘TREP TALK
Kitopi co-founder and CEO Mohamad Ballout’s tips for entrepreneurs wanting to secure funds for their enterprises
Looking at Kitopi’s track record, it’s easy to see the factors that can be used to justify its current valuation. Having launched only three years ago in the UAE, the enterprise needed less than a year to expand to Saudi Arabia, and in 2019, the venture started the year by closing a Series B funding round with $60 million. It wasn’t deterred by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis too—in fact, it thrived. Indeed, a statement from the company noted that it had seen a 300% growth in 2020. The team was able to introduce its groceries vertical Shop Kitopi during the pandemic, when more than 60% of its team were working remotely. The latest cash infusion thus comes at an opportune time, with Ballout revealing that it will be used to channel Kitopi’s expansion within the MENA region, particularly across Saudi Arabia, while also supporting its entry into new markets such as Southeast Asia. So, what makes this enterprise tick and succeed at such a fast-paced rate? “What we always say at Kitopi is, we’re not a family... we’re a team of super entrepreneurs,” Ballout declares. Compared to the so-called family-like culture that we often hear touted by entrepreneurs about their teams, this was refreshing to hear. “The way we see ourselves is that this is a sports team winning a massive tournament,” Ballout adds. “We are a winning NBA-going, LA Lakers-like team, and the goal here is [for] everyone in it to win it, but at the same time, we want to enjoy doing it.”

According to Ballout, Kitopi strives to foster an environment that’s centered on “managing a high-performance culture and a value-add culture.” In fact, a few minutes into our chat, Ballout is insistent on moving the focus of the interview away from him, but instead on highlighting the “25 strong entrepreneurs” he claims to have been leading the company. “Kitopi is not a founder-led business,” Ballout explains. “We’re proud founders, but this is not a founder-led business—we have a top leadership team of 25 people, and they’re all heavily involved with our success story. All 2,500 of us are heavily involved, but it’s a leadership-led team, versus a founder-led business, which [has] really allowed us to move [across our markets] much, much faster.” Ballout believes that by cultivating the spirit of a high-performance sports team in the enterprise, feelings of loyalty and trust are encouraged within everyone who works at the company. “They’re really coming into Kitopi, not just to get a paycheck, not just because they want to hustle, but because we would all enjoy working together, and from the values perspective, we all have the same values, and that’s what works for us,” Ballout explains.

“Understand what skillsets matter most, and when.”

In July this year, Kitopi announced that it has successfully raised $415 MILLION IN A SERIES C led by SoftBank Vision Fund 2, with the round also joined by Chimera, Abu Dhabi’s DisruptAD, Riley, Dogus Group, Next Play Capital, and Nordstar.
There seems to be little doubt that this focus on building its culture and empowering its employees to behave like a high-performance sports team has played a pivotal role in the venture’s growth. But to really understand the enterprise’s aptitude for fostering entrepreneurship-like qualities, you’ll need to understand how it started. Ballout’s own entrepreneurial journey started prior to Kitopi, when he co-founded BMB, which is today seen as one of the largest confectionary businesses in the Middle East, and that is also what sparked his interest in the F&B industry in the first place. After exiting BMB, he joined a private equity firm to become an investor, wherein he found himself surrounded by the entrepreneurial community, with ventures in the food space constantly grabbing his attention. As an investor who was working closely with restaurant owners, Ballout realized scaling seemed to be the biggest issue for a majority of them. “There had to be an easier way to allow restaurants to increase their delivery reach, and therefore, their sales, without them having to break the bank by opening up new locations in traditional brick and mortar outlets,” he notes.

This kicked off the ideation phase for Kitopi—starting with Ballout calling up one of his childhood friends, Saman Darkan, who had experience in digital transformation and starting a few startups as well. Darkan would later join as co-founder and Chief Product and Technology Officer, and lead Kitopi’s launch of its engineering hub (and first tech hub outside the Middle East) in Krakow, Poland. The two put their heads together and started to visualize what Kitopi would end up becoming. “The concept of cloud kitchens existed in that they were a real estate space that were rented out as shared kitchens, but solving the end-to-end for restaurants, in a completely managed cloud kitchen concept was something we pioneered,” Ballout remembers. Next, two more co-founders came on board: Bader Ataya, former co-founder and Managing Partner of e-commerce platform Mumzworld.com, joined as Chief Growth Officer; as well as Andres Arenas, who brought to Kitopi his years of operations experience of running big scale seafood export facilities in his role as Chief Property Officer. “This is very much four friends coming together and building something that we were very passionate about, but more importantly, we were working on a very complex problem,” Ballout explains. “But if you know someone so well, you also know how to solve problems with them very well.”

This seems to be the ethos with which Kitopi has chosen the people to work for it in executive roles—these “Kitopians” certainly have their own entrepreneurial flair, with that either being shaped by their time in the corporate world, or their work in some of the MENA’s leading startups. Some of the key names in Kitopi’s leadership team include Chief Financial Officer Sami Bejjani, Chief of Staff Paul Zoghbi, and Director of Strategy Sabine El Najjar, who were all former McKinsey executives. Jihad Bou Nasr, who was formerly of Boston Consulting Group, is the company’s Regional Managing Director. Pooja Vithlani, Vice President – Product Development, Stacey Pinto, Director – Brand and Reputation, and Aqida Kaleem, Director of Customer Experience, formerly used to work with fellow MENA unicorn, Careem. Ballout says that having close-knit trust amongst the co-founders and its leadership team was essential, especially in Kitopi’s crucial stages of learning to navigate a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous market. Early hurdles varied from getting F&B brands to sign up, as well as embodying different cooking techniques (“how do you reengineer»
that for scale?), plus navigating aggregator players in the multiple cities they operate, and, of course, managing landlords.

“There were so many mistakes, but I believe the biggest one is not building an operating playbook prior to expanding,” Ballout replies, when asked to recall some of the missteps Kitopi might have made along its journey. “We were able to correct that in our second year, but it would have definitely helped to have it from the start.” Having said that, mistakes are supported at Kitopi, adds Ballout. “The logic behind this is that as long as it’s a two-way door decision, mistakes are completely excused—this allows us to learn from them and move super-fast. The goal then is to identify those one-way door decisions that need to be closely analyzed before executing.” Arenas agrees with this sentiment—learning from mistakes fast, as was remaining humble, was key. “As first-movers in the space, we had to try new things, which didn’t always work as we planned, but it is so important to quickly correct the direction and learn what can be done better.” Meanwhile, Darkan states the importance of being attuned to various lifecycles and its issues: “The needs of an organizations differ from stage to stage—it’s thus important to understand what skillsets matter most, and when.”

As the company continues to grow, the Kitopi team have since honed in on their strategies to ensure growth and stability, especially in the midst of uncertainty. Given the enterprise’s focus on building high-performance teams, creating and prioritizing a positive culture comes before everything else. As Darkan says: “Don’t compromise on culture—that holds throughout every stage of growth.”

Along with that, fostering a culture of innovation is critical too, Ballout says. “Our values are built on encouraging our Kitopians to always innovate. If a compromise was identified, we’d be able to rectify it immediately.” This period also saw Kitopi striving to support the ecosystem in which it operated in—the enterprise invited small businesses and F&B brands alike who struggling with keeping physical outlets open to join the platform. Kitopi also teamed up with its delivery partners to educate consumers on health and safety practices. As a tech venture, the team aimed to optimize the kitchens not only for efficiency, but for health and safety standards too. In fact, the team made use of artificial intelligence to help monitor anomalies in the kitchens. “This tech could help ensure our colleagues were washing their hands for 20 seconds, wearing their masks correctly, etc.” Ballout reveals. “If an anomaly was identified, we’d be able to rectify it immediately.”

When the coronavirus pandemic struck in 2020, the company, like many of its peers in the food industry, initially saw a dip in online orders. However, the team worked closely with brands and delivery partners to educate consumers on health and safety practices. As a tech venture, the team aimed to optimize the kitchens not only for efficiency, but for health and safety standards too. In fact, the team made use of artificial intelligence to help monitor anomalies in the kitchens. “This tech could help ensure our colleagues were washing their hands for 20 seconds, wearing their masks correctly, etc.” Ballout reveals. “If an anomaly was identified, we’d be able to rectify it immediately.”

The Kitopi team is thus making sure it bolsters its current momentum, with Ballout saying, “Our focus is to continue growing what we’ve already built.” Ballout says the plan is to continue to innovate and expand Kitopi’s infrastructure, as well as grow strategic restaurant partnerships. With Saudi Arabia set to be Kitopi’s Middle East headquarters, and Dubai remaining as its global head office, the team is steadily charting for its regional (and global) domination. It’s only a matter of time.

**“Don’t compromise on culture—that holds throughout every stage of growth.”**

“SKOS is a suite of applications that optimizes the performance of its cloud kitchen operations in real-time,” Ballout explains. “The solution focuses on delivering a great customer experience across multiple brands in a single kitchen by maximizing operational efficiency.” Since the launch of SKOS, Ballout says Kitopi’s kitchens have been able to double the order volume, while reducing preparation time by 40%. Indeed, the system makes use of data science to predict when drivers will arrive, and how long an item would take to cook, then auto sequence which items to cook first, thereby enhancing speed.

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While it continues to be a tough time in many parts of the world, what the pandemic has done is help the F&B industry leapfrog to the digital age, in what otherwise would have taken years to do,” Ballout notes. “Cloud kitchens are the future, as they not only help restaurants scale beyond borders quickly, but provide customers access to their favorite brands, from anywhere in the world.”

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THE FACES OF KITOPI

ON MOTIVATION

BADER ATAYA / CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF GROWTH OFFICER
“Our work is infinitely motivating and appealing because as a team, with a common vision, common values, and each other’s sincere best intentions at heart always, we are far more than the sum of our parts.”

SAMAN DARKAN / CO-FOUNDER & CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER
“We are pioneering change in the food ecosystem. It is a space we can all relate to on a personal level and one that is evolving rapidly. My hope for Kitopi is to create an organization that inspires. A brand people identify with that speaks louder than just the services we offer.”

ANDRES ARENAS / CO-FOUNDER & CHIEF PROPERTY OFFICER
“First, having amazing colleagues to work with and having the opportunity to learn from each other every day. Second, being able to assist in developing an infrastructure that allows for a quick to market advantage and that acts as an enabler of innovation.”

MAHMOUD AWAD / CHIEF LEGAL OFFICER
“To know that I am part of a team dedicated to leaving a lasting footprint for start-up in the region and the ‘cloud kitchen’ space internationally. My part in that journey is to assist in developing an infrastructure that allows for a quick to market advantage and that acts as an enabler of innovation.”

EKTA BHOWANI / VICE PRESIDENT - PRODUCT
“The team is world-class, so there is always someone inspiring you to push harder. We’re disrupting a traditional industry (F&B) and doing it at scale. Whenever I meet someone new, I’m always curious if they’ve ordered from our brands. My goal would be us to capture (at least) 50% of the stomach’s market share of a customer.”

SABINE EL NAJJAR / DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY
“I’ve learned that we don’t always need to have the five-year plan laid out before taking action. Sometimes, we have to follow educated hunches to leverage momentum and be market leaders.”

POOJA VITHLANI / VICE PRESIDENT PRODUCT MANAGEMENT, CUSTOMER & BRAND
“When speed is valued and there’s so much innovation opportunity ahead of you, there is a natural tendency to jump right into execution mode. However, it’s critical to take a step back to ensure sound strategic alignment across key stakeholders on what needs to be done and why, and ironing out any assumptions, so that you can ensure smoother and more plentiful execution.”

PAUL ZOOGHBI / CHIEF OF STAFF
“The importance of fast execution, learning from our experience and being ready to re-pivot to refine the model, while keeping quality and customer experience always on top of mind.”

JIHAD BOU NASR / Regional Managing Director
“It is very important for an entrepreneur to be able to work at two speeds simultaneously. The slow gear is needed in order to build the right systems, tools, processes and have a smooth-functioning organization. However, that takes time, and hence the fast gear is important to ensure you are pivoting and course-correcting quickly so that priorities are still being met, until the outcomes of the slow gear kick in.”

STACEY PINTO / DIRECTOR OF BRAND & REPUTATION
“At Kitopi, no matter how fast we move, and how quickly we innovate, we work really hard on reminding ourselves that we’re all unique individuals on the same team, working hard on bringing our best selves to work every day. We’ve all heard the saying: ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast.’ So, even though we’ve got our eyes on the prize, we’ve got each other’s backs getting there.”
Eventtus co-founder and CEO Mai Medhat reflects on her decade-long entrepreneurial journey that’s led to her startup’s acquisition by Bevy, a US-based enterprise community event engine by TAMARA PUPIC
If you study the backstories of many of today’s successful entrepreneurs, one pattern will emerge—it seems to take 10 years to become a so-called “overnight success.” By the same token, it is almost a decade—it was in 2012, to be precise—since Mai Medhat, CEO, and Nihal Fares, Chief Product Officer, founded Eventtus, an event management software company, in Cairo, and this year, the MENA region is celebrating the duo’s entrepreneurial success. Bevy, a US-based enterprise community event engine, recently acquired Eventtus, adding more than 20 engineers to its team, including Medhat and Fares. “I think we are still processing this,” Medhat says with a shy smile, when asked how she felt when realizing that her startup was indeed being acquired. “The past few months were a rollercoaster, we didn’t have time to really realize what was happening, but it hit me the most when I announced the news to the team, and saw their reaction and how happy they were with the achievement of our work.”

**Medhat and Fares met** while studying computer engineering at Ain Shams University in Cairo, eventually winning a top prize at the Imagine Cup, Microsoft’s annual competition for young engineers, held in Egypt in 2009, for their joint graduation project, a technology solution to the traffic jam problem in Cairo. In 2011, the duo attended a Startup Weekend Cairo event, where they first developed a concept that would eventually grow into Eventtus. Over the years, Eventtus has become an all-in-one platform that caters to events ticketing, event management, and apps for events. It enables event attendees to customize their event schedule through an interactive agenda, and also offer them instant updates through a social media feed and opportunities to network with other attendees.

With Eventtus having had such a momentous journey over the years, it is not surprising to hear Medhat admit to the emotional toll of selling the business she founded. “It was not an easy decision at all, but it is for the best,” she says. “I built a business for a reason. I wanted to help event organizers to host amazing, successful events. Joining Bevy will help us continue our vision, and scale this even bigger.” After a year in which most businesses suffered a financial hit from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those in the events space, Medhat is grateful for Eventtus’ good fortune. “Finding an acquirer who is a perfect fit for the business, team, culture, and the growth of everyone in the team made the decision way easier,” she says. “We were lucky with Bevy, and the journey of Eventtus will continue, but on a way bigger scale.”

**The US-based Bevy has been designed** as an end-to-end community event engine that helps businesses to build a community by enabling them to have a 360-degree view of their event attendees, and to also measure the impact of their efforts. “What’s unique about Bevy is how they thread events together,” Medhat noted, in a press release about the acquisition. “They’ve built a powerful community event engine that helps enterprise teams create a sense of community among their customers, prospects, partners, and employees. This is what all other event platforms are missing. And it’s the key to unlocking global scale and growth.” Medhat reveals that Bevy’s conferences, Startup Grind and CMX Summit, have been Eventtus’ customers for the past four years, meaning that the two teams already know and work well with each other. In addition to having developed complimentary products, being aligned in terms of values and company culture has been a plus that contributed to concluding the deal, Medhat adds.

“It took us two to three months to complete the whole transaction, and the fact that Bevy and Eventtus were not strangers prior to the deal discussion was very helpful and accelerated the deal a lot,” Medhat says. “It took us couple of weeks to ensure that we are aligned on the vision, the opportunity ahead, and to confirm that it’s in the best interest of both companies to join forces and continue working together.” However, she highlights that proper communication was key for ensuring that all stakeholders were on board with the decision. “The way it [the proposed deal] was communicated to the team and investors was important,” she says. “I knew they would

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**WE HAVE MANAGED TO PUT TOGETHER A GREAT TEAM AND RAISE THE QUALITY BAR VERY HIGH, BUT WE HAVE ALSO ALWAYS GATHERED AROUND DIFFERENT THINGS, SUCH AS FOOD, ACTIVITIES, FITNESS AND OF COURSE EVENTS.**
have a lot of questions and being prepared with answers makes it easier to accept and understand such a big change.” In acquiring Eventtus, Bevy extends its event technology stack with the addition of a mobile in-person conference app, and several other engagement tools for attendees. Once Eventtus is integrated with Bevy’s enterprise community event engine, customers will have the most comprehensive, end-to-end event management solution to manage and scale their virtual, hybrid, and in-person event programs.

Medhat and Fares will be joining the Bevy leadership team—Medhat as the Vice President of Innovation in order to support product and business growth across all functions and departments, while Fares will be Director of Product Management and will be responsible for growing Bevy’s products for in-person, hybrid, and virtual events. In retrospect, Medhat believes that the collaborative company culture at Eventtus that Fares and her nurtured zealously over the years has enabled them to attain this success. “We have managed to put together a great team and raise the quality bar very high, but we have also always gathered around different things, such as food, activities, fitness and of course events,” she says. “It’s hard to maintain the company culture while scaling, especially with diverse teams spread across different cities, but sticking to our values and a good hiring process has helped us in maintaining our culture.”

The enforced pause faced by event organizers, including Eventtus, due to the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be one more proof that investing in one’s team always pays off, she says. “We had a great business, but overnight, the whole events market (and the world) turned upside down,” Medhat adds. “After one or two weeks of panic, we had to act and act fast. We went back to the drawing board, all the team was involved in brainstorming, trying to figure out different ways to keep our customers in business, and to help events stay connected with their communities. We didn’t invent virtual events, but we reimagined what virtual events are, how they can work, what we can offer to our customers, and how to educate the community about it. It was one of the most challenging and interesting phases of the Eventtus journey, and in just a few weeks, we hosted our first virtual conference with 1,500+ virtual attendees and speakers from 16 different countries. It wouldn’t have been possible without the team, their innovation, and commitment. This is the output of the great culture we built over the years and I’m very proud of this.”

Even before building a company that has attracted the attention of international investors, and now acquirers too, Medhat had already established herself as one of the symbols of the MENA region’s renaissance in entrepreneurship by joining a panel discussion alongside Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and US President Barack Obama at the Global Entrepreneurship Summit 2016 at Stanford University, California. On the basis of a decade of experience of doing business in the MENA region, she is confident to state that the business climate and the entrepreneurial ecosystem in 2021 are definitely different than five or ten years ago due to more support, funding, and experienced entrepreneurs. “I think we can do better,” Medhat continues. “When it comes to the ease of doing business, it’s still difficult and expensive to start a business, and scale it across the borders of each country. We still have to register a company to do business across the Arab world. Then, infrastructure and support services, like internet stability and voice over internet protocol (VOIP) services, are now a necessity for doing business specially with remote work. Also, we need more support for software-as-a-service (SaaS) businesses, which usually need different setup and support services, because their financial models are different, and we don’t have a lot of knowledge in this space to be shared in order to help more of these companies to grow and scale.”

MAI MEDHAT AND NIHAL FARES
met while studying computer engineering at Ain Shams University in Cairo. In 2011, the duo attended a Startup Weekend Cairo event, where they first developed a concept that would eventually grow into Eventtus.

TREP TALK
Eventtus co-founder and CEO Mai Medhat’s tips for entrepreneurs

DON’T GO AT IT ALONE
“Find yourself a co-founder, or co-founders, to build the business with. They will be your support system and complete your skills. I couldn’t have made it without my support system. My co-founder, my family, and my husband who understand how it is to build a business and work around the clock, help me deal with all the emotional stress that comes with this package too.”

FIND YOURSELF A MENTOR
“A mentor is not important just for the business, but for the growth of the entrepreneur himself/herself. It should be someone you can trust, and with whom you can share all your thoughts, challenges, and fears.”

MAKE LEARNING A PRIORITY
“Always read and educate yourself in different topics. Being an entrepreneur or a CEO means that you need to wear multiple hats, so you don’t have to be an expert on each topic but you do need some basic knowledge in many different areas.”
But when it comes to entrepreneurial opportunities in the MENA region, Medhat still considers them to be limitless. “The majority of populations are youth with very high internet penetration, so it’s a heaven for internet companies and consumer-based products,” she says.

“Governments across the MENA region are realizing the importance of startups and small businesses and we are seeing huge support from governments and a lot of events and initiatives to support entrepreneurs and startups.” In conclusion, Medhat’s most important piece of advice for fellow entrepreneurs is to always keep in mind that the startup life is a marathon, not a sprint. “We read that a lot in books, but I can’t stress how accurate it is,” she says. “If the founders burn out, they will not be able to continue the journey and handle the never-ending startup pressure. In the early days, we used to work around the clock, no days off, no weekends, but this can’t go forever. Having a healthy lifestyle and taking few days off every now and then makes a huge difference in keeping the momentum, especially because of the mental rollercoaster that any entrepreneur can have. For example, one day I was on the stage with President Obama and Mark Zuckerberg, but the next day I still had to manage cashflow, fundraising, hiring, customer satisfaction and everything else, including all the stress and pressure that come with that.”

However, Medhat might have had an advantage in dealing with all this-and that is centered on her gender, in that she believes female entrepreneurs are generally more compassionate. “This is a great skill for leaders in dealing with their teams, customers, and individuals who work with,” she declares. “People appreciate this, and it turns out to create a great culture within the team.”
There’s a Spanish proverb that says that “the belly rules the mind,” and I have often felt that I am a walking personification of that particular aphorism. And that is why I have often felt that I am particularly lucky to be able to live in the UAE, where a vibrant food scene is just waiting to be explored and enjoyed— but only if you know where to look. While the industry at large has had its own share of troubles to tackle amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the period has also seen a rise of entrepreneurs in the sector who have either launched new food brands, or doubled down on the ones that they were running already. Indeed, if there’s one thing that can be said about the UAE’s food scene, it’s that it’s never static— and it’s the homegrown heroes that are almost always shaking up the marketplace.
Talking Shop with 10 of the UAE’s Most Promising Homegrown Food Brands.

This feature aims to showcase the entrepreneurs behind just 10 of the most promising (and popular) brands that have emerged in this landscape—many of these are businesses that I am personally a customer of, and I’ve also been lucky to receive a plethora of suggestions from Arva Ahmed, co-founder of Frying Pan Adventures (fryingpanadventures.com), which offers food and culture tours in Dubai that have become one of the city’s must-do activities for both visitors and local residents since 2013. Ahmed and her team of passionate storytellers and avid explorers enjoy seeking out hidden food gems and transporting you beyond the food with their stories, nostalgia, and insider secrets of the city—all of which made her a great ally as I went about figuring out brands to include in this feature. While this is definitely not an exhaustive list of all the amazing names out there, I’d like to think that it’s a good selection to be showcased all the same. But, of course, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting—and so, I certainly hope you give these homegrown brands a try for yourself.

Bon appetit!

by ABY SAM THOMAS
As the company behind the Dibba Bay Oysters brand, East Coast Shellfish LLC was officially established in 2016, but that doesn’t really take into account the years of work done to lead up to this particular moment. As founder and CEO Ramie Murray points out, there was a lot of time spent in everything from securing the right environmental permits, to waiting for applications for ocean concessions to be approved, before the Middle East’s first shellfish farm producing gourmet oysters came into being in the waters by the coastal town of Dibba in Fujairah, UAE. But the hustle didn’t end there- before Dibba Bay Oysters’ first harvest hit the market in the second quarter of 2017, Murray remembers having to introduce the product in question to the UAE’s F&B scene, which meant a number of face-to-face tastings and explanations to convince chefs to take a locally grown oyster seriously- after all, the norm at the time was for restaurants to import this kind of shellfish from abroad. “Thankfully, the quality of the product spoke for itself,” Murray remembers. “So, it was just a matter of putting the hard yards in visiting as many restaurants as possible!” But this zeal showcased by Murray and his team ended up getting the better of them as well. “Very soon, the bottleneck became our limited production output,” Murray explains. “And no, contrary to what everyone says, it is not a good problem to have! Try explaining to a chef who believes in your product and has printed your brand on his menu that you can’t supply him for a few months, as you’ve sold out and are waiting for more oysters to grow... Not fun!”

But despite such struggles and strife along the way, Murray and his team at Dibba Bay Oysters persevered, and in 2019, the company found itself backed by strong financial partners to enable its further growth- and the results speak for themselves. The very fact that diners can often be seen asking for Dibba Bay Oysters by name when they are out and about in the UAE is a sign of the brand’s appeal, and its ubiquitous nature in restaurants around the country (and beyond) showcases its development and expansion as well. “Our production capacity has rocketed from a mere average of 20,000 oysters a month two years ago, to almost 200,000 per month today, with this expected to grow up and beyond 500,000 per month by early 2022,” Murray reveals. “The really exciting part of our growth story is that we are now exporting over 50% of our production to lucrative and discerning markets such as Moscow and Hong Kong.”
THE UNIQUE QUALITIES OF THE WATERS OF THE UAE, which have been historically showcased through the country’s legendary white pearls, now live on through the Dibba Bay oyster shell.
BUT MURRAY NOTES HERE that a large part of the credit for the success that Dibba Bay Oysters has seen in the exporting arm of its business has to go to its location in the UAE. “We have an amazing export advantage over most oyster producers globally, due to the fundamental advantages of being in the UAE,” Murray explains. “We are able to farm our oysters in a pristine marine environment in Dibba, yet due to the incredible infrastructure we enjoy here, we can harvest in the morning, be at Dubai Airports (one of the world’s largest fresh air transport hubs) by lunch time, and then be landed in the majority of the world’s major capitals by the evening of the same day... I cannot overstate the importance of this when dealing with a high value live seafood product.”

“Our production capacity has rocketed to almost 200,000 per month today.”
CLOSER TO HOME, while Dibba Bay Oysters continues to supply restaurants with its products through trusted distributions partners in the UAE, the brand has also been experimenting with developing its own direct-to-consumer channels here. “We opened our first Oyster Box concept in Dubai’s Umm Sequim 1 fishing harbor in early 2020, and following its success as a specialist farm-to-table oyster venue, we are now developing further locations within Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, and Abu Dhabi,” Murray says. “It has been really engaging to be able to interact with our consumers directly and share our brand story, and the feedback has been fantastic. There are so few genuine farm-to-table concepts here in the UAE where consumers can fully trust and enjoy consuming a product directly from the people that grew it.”

DIBBA BAY OYSTERS MEAT TO SHELL RATIO CAN VARY BETWEEN 18% TO 25%, depending on the season, making them plump and meaty.
AND PERHAPS THEREIN LIES IN THE KEY REASON for Dibba Bay Oysters becoming the much-loved brand that it is today. “First and foremost, our oysters are really good,” Murray says. “The local story is a big selling point and really important, but Dibba Bay Oysters are a world-class product that happens to be grown locally here in the UAE. We have excellent growing conditions for oysters on the east coast of the UAE, thanks to the ideal temperatures in the waters and the rich density of food that’s available most of the year. Our oysters have an incredibly fast growth rate, needing only 7-9 months to reach adult size- European oysters, in comparison, can take up to 2-3 years to grow to market size, and you would only see growth rates peak in this way in the summer. We are really lucky that we have the combination of a locally sustainably grown product that is as good as, if not better than, anything that has been traditionally imported here.”

That said, Murray admits that it’s been quite a tortuous road to get Dibba Bay Oysters to its current standing- it definitely cannot have been easy to kickstart the growth of an entirely new species and farming method in a region with very limited projects in the aquaculture or agriculture domain. But do the returns outweigh the risks? The answer seems to be yes, “Dibba Bay Oysters has been, and continues to be, an incredible journey of challenges and accomplishments,” Murray declares. “I guess that’s what makes it so fun and rewarding.” dibbabay.com

Harvesting Success

Dibba Bay Oysters founder Ramie Murray shares his tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow his lead.

Do your research.
“Find out how big is the market for the product you are thinking about introducing [whether] locally, regionally, and internationally. Be very careful on your price data that you are basing your financial assumptions on- just because a restaurant sells something at a high price does not mean the producer is getting anything close to that.”

Be clear on the rules.
“If you are planning on growing something completely new, make sure that the right regulation in place for this product locally, and also for export.”

“Being local” isn’t enough.
“If you choose to produce something locally, make sure it’s as good as (or better than) and price competitive to what can be easily imported. Simply having something grown locally, but is not particularly good, is just not going to fly with the majority of consumers.”
Healthy eating just got more rewarding as Rayya Nutri offers a 100% value back on experiences at the family-friendly wellness resort when you avail the 24-day meal plan.

Stay fit by choosing one of five customized meal plans, namely Slimmer, Balanced, Athletic, Vegan, or Paleo-friendly; each comprises three meals and two snacks daily, delivered right at your doorstep.

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T&C: The offer is valid until September 30, 2021. The value-back vouchers cannot be exchanged or redeemed for cash, and it is non-transferable. The offer is not valid in conjunction with any other promotion or offer.
Ambika Rajgopal
FOUNDER
HAUTE SAUCE

Haute Sauce is a UAE-based artisanal range of small-batch, natural, vegan, gluten-free hot sauces.
FOUNDED IN DECEMBER 2019, Haute Sauce makes use of fresh ingredients that range high on the Scoville scale to create what its website proudly declares to be “pure fire” – and I can personally vouch for the fact that its sauces are certainly that, and perhaps more. But, funnily enough, one of the challenges that Rajgopal has come across in her time at Haute Sauce is describing how hot her sauces actually are after all, if you’re used to making use of those that are commercially available (which are quite meek in terms of real spice levels), you might flip out when encountering the sauces Rajgopal makes using habanero peppers (100,000-350,000 on the Scoville scale) and ghost peppers (more than a million on the Scoville scale). “The word ‘spicy’ is so relative and subjective – what’s spicy for one person can be mild for another,” Rajgopal explains. “I think though that over time, we’ve grown a reputation of being a hot sauce for real spice heads.” Indeed, it’s thanks to these “real spice heads” that Rajgopal ended up making Haute Sauce the business it is today. “We weren’t planning to do this commercially,” she reveals. “Our growth was really organic. I gave some to friends, they ended up taking it to work, and before I knew it, I was getting orders from colleagues, friends, and friends of friends. After that, it just felt natural to make it official, and expand our product range – and since then, there’s been no looking back.” Haute Sauce currently offers sauces in four different varieties: Original (made with habanero peppers and coriander), Haunting (the hottest of the lot, thanks to its use of ghost peppers sourced from Northeast India), Puckering (a seasonal blend of habanero peppers and raw mango), and Mellowing (made with Thai bird’s eye chili and roasted yellow capsicum, for those with lower spice thresholds).
Haute Sauce founder Ambika Rajgopal shares her tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow her lead.

› Use your instinct (and follow your gut)
“Use your instinct (and follow your gut). You have to learn to trust your gut, and let it lead you into making informed choices.”

› Action your idea.
“Action your idea. While planning is essential and integral, too much over-planning and over-analyzing can be detrimental, and can waste precious time.”

› Think like the consumer.
“Think like the consumer. While it’s important to hit your targets and goals for the business, it’s important to put yourself in the shoes of your customers, and see every situation from their perspective.”

› Find your niche.
“Find your niche. I think saturating an already oversaturated F&B market does little to no good. It’s so important to carve your own niche, and make your product different to other brands in the market. It’s important to constantly push forward your strengths and differences as your unique selling proposition.”

› It’s perhaps worth reiterating here that Haute Sauce’s offerings don’t have the vinegary, overtly acidic flavors one finds in most commercially available hot sauces—these have a real stab of heat, and they are also completely natural, vegan, and gluten-free. “All our products are freshly produced and preservative-free, using quality ingredients,” Rajgopal adds. “Since we are a micro-saucery, we only make hot sauces in small batches—so, we never compromise on freshness, quality, or taste. This makes us stand out.” This would explain how Haute Sauce can boast of some amazing accomplishments while still being a nascent brand—its very first collaboration was with Michelin-starred Chef Akira Back’s eponymous outpost in Dubai. “We are so grateful to Chef Giovanni Ledon for believing in us and pairing the flavors of one of our sauces so finely to create a charred pineapple and enoki mushroom ceviche that was served at Akira Back as a special in November 2020,” Rajgopal recalls.

› Haute Sauce was chosen amongst other brands regionwide for Rihanna’s multinational cosmetics brand Fenty Beauty by - Mellowing Haute Sauce was sent as part of the UAE PR campaign.
But it’s not just those in the F&B scene that have been impressed by Haute Sauce. “Most recently, we were approached by Fenty Beauty, the international makeup brand launched by globally renowned popstar Rihanna, to do a collaboration with them,” Rajgopal reveals. “We were one of the few brands that was pitched to the Fenty Beauty headquarters in California, and we were selected by them to collaborate with the brand for its PR campaign to launch its new lip gloss, Gloss Bomb Heat, in the UAE. We are still reeling from the excitement of it all- it’s our first collaboration with a brand that is both international and non-food related, and we are very proud to have been part of such a unique and out-of-the-box partnership.”

As gratifying as all of these achievements have been, Rajgopal is also happy to admit that as an entrepreneur, she remains overwhelmed by the response she has received for Haute Sauce so far. “The following we received for our products has been so humbling,” she says. “Despite not being from the food industry, people were so encouraging, and they gave us incredible feedback. I have to thank my initial supporters for affirming their belief in a product that was intended initially just for myself- that’s what allowed Haute Sauce to turn into the brand it is today.”

“WE’VE GROWN A REPUTATION OF BEING A HOT SAUCE FOR REAL SPICE HEADS.”

hautesaucery.com
Mohammad Alhawari

FOUNDER AND CEO
FEEL GOOD TEA CO.

As a corporate exec, Mohammad Alhawari had quite a high-flying job for many years in the insurance sector in the UAE- however, that career trajectory of his came to a halt in 2019 after he was let go from his executive position in the corporate entity that he worked for. It wasn’t something Alhawari was prepared for, and he freely admits to having been hit by depression soon after this particular episode. But after lots of soul-searching and months of therapy, Alhawari found himself becoming more appreciative of the little things in life that brought him joy- one of which was a freshly brewed cup of tea. A passion for tea was thus sparked, and as Alhawari dove deep into the industry that made his favorite brew, he soon became increasingly aware of a gap in the market for good quality specialty tea- and that ended up triggering his entrepreneurial instincts.

Alhawari launched Feel Good Tea Co. in early 2020, with the Emirati entrepreneur making use of research and his own travels around the world to find the premium ingredients that make the brand’s signature tea blends. By mixing together different kinds of organic tea leaves with herbs, spices, fruits, and other such ingredients, Feel Good Tea Co. is able to offer a variety of concoctions that can be enjoyed by simply tipping the contents of one of the brand’s Tea Pods (glass tubes that keep the teas fresh) into a cup of hot water.
“BRANDING HAS BEEN A KEY PART OF OUR JOURNEY.”

“Feel Good Tea Co. really is about quality and experience,” Alhawari says. “I personally select each of our blends, which rotate seasonally, before they are pressed into our Tea Pods. Our products not only focus on unique blends and flavors, but also on a unique tea experience using loose leaf teas. The act of handling loose tea allows customers to touch, see, and smell the leaves, both in their dry and wet forms. The ritual of brewing the perfect cup can be both relaxing and contemplative, not to mention having the ability to create a cup of tea that perfectly suits a consumer’s personal preferences.”

“As an online business, Feel Good Tea Co. allows customers to buy the multiple varieties of teas the brand offers through its website, following which personalized boxes containing the purchased blends are then sent to their respective addresses. The company’s digital presence is thus something Alhawari and his team have placed a lot of importance on, and that seems to have translated well for them in terms of revenue as well. “A key objective for me was to focus on the customer experience,” Alhawari says. “Tea is a very social experience, and we wanted to encourage this through the brand and our product offering. For me, it is more about the enjoyment of my customers, and how they interact with our products. We harnessed the power of social media by utilizing advertising tools on Facebook, Google Ads, and Instagram. We now have a following of 53,100 on Instagram alone, something I am very proud of. During the first year of operation, the company generated AED4.6 million in revenue amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has continued to grow from strength to strength.”

FEEL GOOD TEA CO. PACKAGING MATERIAL IS ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY AND RECYCLABLE. This includes the teabags, made from biodegradable corn fibre.
Feel Good Tea Co. founder Mohammad Alhawari shares his tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow her lead.

**Do not discount the importance of creativity, passion, and innovation.**

“Taking a step back from the corporate world allowed me to truly reflect on what would excite me. Feel Good Tea Co. was born out of love and passion. I would advise anyone starting a business to ensure it’s something you are truly passionate about, so that the excitement remains throughout.”

**Use social media to your advantage.**

“In this day and age, realising the power of social media is extremely important. When we launched Feel Good Tea Co., it was essential for us to engage with consumers authentically. Through creative, engaging content, we’ve definitely made a noise, and our customers are able to relate with us and feel the human connection. For emerging brands, it’s important to have a presence on social media, ensuring the content posted is in line with your brands’ values, as well as relatable to your target audience.”

**Empower your team.**

“It can never be emphasized enough just how important it is to have a strong team around you from the beginning. Make sure you hire people that share your same passion and ambition, and empower them to drive the business with you. By doing this, you build the trust needed to be able to take a step back from day-to-day operations, so you can focus on the strategy and key areas of the business.”

Alhawari adds that as the business picked up pace, he and his team went on to develop a corporate gifting package that delivers personalized boxes to companies across all sectors, and it’s an arm of the enterprise that has also seen spectacular growth.

When asked about the key factors that have allowed Feel Good Tea Co. to see such success so early on in its business trajectory, Alhawari points toward his focus on the company’s branding.

“What makes us stand out is not just the product, but also how we present ourselves,” he explains. “Branding has been a key part of our journey, and from the onset, I wanted to present a brand that was fun, and encouraged the same. This goes right from our digital presence across our website and social channels, through to our packaging. The boxes are completely personalized, and we reach a wider audience via Talabat, Deliveroo, and Instashop, in addition to our extremely user-friendly website. Through constant exploration and research on new trends, while also constantly taking in customer feedback, we have been able to build and scale the business exponentially. With Feel Good Tea Co. slowly becoming a household name in the region, we continue to drive awareness of tea rituals, and inspire a culture of tea lovers.”

**WHAT’S THE T?**

Feel Good Tea Co. provides one-of-a-kind personalized gifts from Dubai to the rest of the world.
As hard as it may be to believe, I’ve come across people who don’t like cupcakes— but even they couldn’t say no to the miniature forms of these confections as presented by the Dubai-based delivery-centered bakeshop, Sugargram. Founded by Elaf Patel in 2019, Sugargram offers bite-sized cupcakes that showcase both flavor and, wait for it, personality— that’s right, these delectable creations have been bestowed names like Fudge Judy, Jelly Jennifer, Oreona Grande, Sasha Speculoos, among others. Fun, sweet, and just plain tasty, these cupcakes have helped Sugargram make its way easily into people’s hearts.

“I think we tapped into something incredible with Sugargram, where we consistently delivered something delicious to our audiences,” Patel says. “What really sets us apart is how much love and care we put into building a personality for our cupcakes, and ensuring every bite is perfectly made with the most luxurious ingredients. A lot of people relate to food very emotionally or personally; so, I think that’s something that really got people into the brand with the special cupcake personalities, and the enthusiastic ways we celebrate every occasion. Since it was the first pastry brand to really do that in Dubai, the following grew fairly organically.”
Hernan & Marivic Fuentes

CO-FOUNDERS

PIES BASKET

Perhaps best known for the soft and fluffy ensaymada that it sells, Pies Basket is a Sharjah-based bakery specializing in different kinds of Filipino breads, cakes, and pastries. Founded by husband-and-wife duo Hernan and Marivic Fuentes in 2006, Pies Basket’s offerings are today seen as a mainstay of the Filipino expat population in the UAE— but that’s not to say that the rest of the country’s residents aren’t catching on to this enterprise’s delicious offerings. After all, as a business that declares all of its products to have been “made with love,” it’s hard for anyone, Filipino or otherwise, to turn away from, say, the custardy goodness of Pies Basket’s inipit, or the flaky flavor of its hopia monggo. “Ever since I was a little girl, I always dreamed of having a business, of owning my own bakery,” Marivic says. “Our little business started along with a friend, who had a background in baking, where we baked bread from our home kitchen, until we officially launched it on May 23, 2006. We were the first bakery at the time to provide ensaymada on supermarket shelves, and since then, we’ve seen demand for all our bread— even from non-Filipinos.”
Indeed, Pies Basket’s success in the UAE has led to the rise of other players in the country wanting to copy what it does, and while that’s resulted in a tough landscape to navigate, the small business has maintained its presence in the market by staying true to the values it was founded with. “One of the major challenges that we face is that when the rest of the market saw the demand for similar bread, the bigger bakeries were able to command larger production, because they had the capital for automating the processes,” Marivic notes. “We didn’t, and still don’t have, a public relations officer (PRO) to conduct all our legal affairs, so I am still the one who handles all the necessary requirements and ensures compliance with government regulations. As a woman, I also found it particularly challenging when having to deal with legal departments, but I’m not afraid to ask for help, especially in areas that I am not familiar with. I firmly believe that we are doing good and honest work, so there is no reason to be afraid in seeking counsel, and it just so happens that we have always been brought to good people who have helped us along the way.” Marivic’s notion, therefore, seems to be that “good begets good,” and I guess it’s something that more of us should consider taking to heart, both in our lives and our work.

piesbasket.com

“We have strived to maintain our prices, despite the fluctuations in the economy.”

Pies Basket co-founder Marivic Fuentes shares her tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow her lead.

› Be honest in all your dealings.

“We believe that honesty may not always be the quickest way to get rich, but the rewards in knowing that there is no deception in the products/services that you provide is greater than anything that money can buy.”

› Love what you do.

“I always had a love for bread, and it was a blessing that I was able to find a way to turn my passion into something that would provide materially for my family. The love that you show in your products/services will always be seen by those who will consume it.”

› Believe in your God-given gifts.

“We at Pies Basket also believe that our company is a way for us to give back to the community. There is more value when one creates a product that will be beneficial for the entire community, than just for oneself.”

› Invest in quality—especially in the F&B industry.

“We, as a company, believe that taking shortcuts to create profit, but sacrificing quality, will not only hurt our brand, but will hurt our consumers as well.”
For someone who is a law graduate with a career in corporate communications, and is neither a trained chef nor has had any dealings with the world of hospitality until now, one cannot be faulted for looking at Nana-Serwa Mancell quite curiously in her current role as the founder of Veghana, a Dubai-based F&B enterprise that specializes in serving plant-based West African cuisine. But that doesn’t mean you should dismiss Mancell and her endeavor either— if anything, she’s following in the footsteps of entrepreneurial legends like Coco Chanel (who had no formal education to guide her way in the fashion industry), or Ariana Huffington (who had little experience in journalism before starting her eponymous blog-turned-business). Indeed, it’s to her credit that Mancell is well-aware of the odds that seem to be stacked against her—and yet, she is not backing down from chasing her dream regardless. “Every aspect of Veghana is a new learning and a new challenge, from plating food to keeping up with the strict (and necessary) municipality regulations,” she says. “I describe it as being pushed blindfolded into a dark room filled with people, being spun around, then told to walk to the other side of the room, and discovering your legs are tied.”

It’s not really a pretty picture that Mancell paints— but I must confess that it only makes me keener to understand why she continues to do what she does at Veghana. Born and raised in Ghana, Mancell remembers using the food she had grown up with as a means to explore and express her identity when pursuing her education in the United Kingdom. “Back then, I was taken aback by the positive response to our traditional cuisine from my fellow students from around the world,” she says.
VEGHANA'S RECIPES are packed with nutritious plants and superfoods to emulate the aromatic flavors of Ghana.
“Decades later, when I embraced a plant-based lifestyle, I found that our West African dishes had so much to offer in terms of variety, taste, and nutrition—our plants grow where ocean means rainforest. I knew I was on to a winner.” And that’s how Mancell ended up launching Veghana in Dubai in April this year, which had her merge the worlds of healthy vegan food and aromatic Ghanaian cuisine to provide a bespoke delivery and catering service in the Emirate.

For those of you who may be unfamiliar with West African cuisine, Mancell has a couple of stats to get you up to speed with this particular kind of food—and also showcase why Veghana is well-poised to make it big as a business. “Pinterest, with 320 million users around the world, included West African recipes in its top 100 trends for 2020 after searches for West African food grew by 311%,” she notes. “That’s a lot of people who want to find out about our cuisine. Also, American food giant Whole Foods included West African cuisine in its top ten food trends for 2020. And there are very few suppliers to meet this interest. Even if you looked internationally, you would be hard-pressed to find vegan African restaurants, so in Dubai, we are certainly the sole occupants in our sector. What we offer—very tasty comfort food—is something not usually associated with vegan food, and this pushes us further to the front.” And the reception Veghana has received is proof of this, Mancell adds. “I am particularly pleased that we have built a base of repeat customers made up of various nationalities, ages, and backgrounds. People who order regularly don’t seem to have much in common other than their city of residence and ability to navigate our website—this proves to me the popularity of our cuisine, which makes people coming back for more.”

While it’s still early days for Veghana as an enterprise, Mancell has been making use of the reaction she has got to it thus far as fuel for the big dreams she has for the brand. “Veghana officially launched in April this year, and I’ve been overwhelmed by the positive response to the food and the brand,” she says. “According to my business plan, it should take another year before I could host a pop-up restaurant in a major venue—my long-held dream. SEVA, Dubai’s iconic vegan destination, called me one month after launch, inviting me to host a pop-up in their gorgeous venue—I dropped my phone in excitement! The event was sold out and a huge success, and we are now planning pop-up events with other choice venues across the city.” Let it be noted here that Mancell puts a lot of thought and effort into the events that she hosts—and there’s a larger reason behind it than just her business. “Veghana is not just about food, but also art, culture, music, and conversation,” she explains. “Our events are intentionally a sensory overload experience in attempt to undo the negative connotations around Africa; an explosion of sound, sight, and taste that we know people find totally compelling.”

But it hasn’t been all smooth sailing either. For instance, when it comes to marketing her brand, Mancell, who has shied away from social media all her life, has been on a learning curve in terms of using platforms like, say, Instagram, for her brand, but again,
that hasn’t stopped her from working on it all the same— as she puts it: “I do the posts whilst waiting for things to boil!” But don’t take Mancell’s unfamiliarity with social media to mean that she’s a novice at marketing— on the contrary, she’s extremely clear on what her business needs to win in the landscape it operates in. “It would be a mistake to judge your success by the number of likes on your posts,” she says. “Getting this following to translate into actual and increasing sales is a real challenge. Luckily, for me, I have lifelong experience in marketing, and understand what many of my contemporaries miss, which is not worry about what to post, but instead follow a strategic path to raise your brand awareness— and then those posts will write themselves. We create more content than we can share, but I’m very strict about sticking to our marketing strategy, no matter how good a picture looks.”

With ideas like these governing how Mancell is going about building her brand, the future does look to be bright for the business, and she is certainly excited to see how things unfold in the long term. “Launching my West African cuisine in the vegan space means I’m a big fish in a small but growing pond,” she notes. “And I would no way would get anywhere near as much attention, if I had to compete in the non-vegan sector with all the marvelous F&B concepts popping up all the time. But the vegan sector is growing exponentially, and we are part of a tidal wave that may be as yet only just building up momentum.”

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**GET THE GREEN LIGHT**

Veghana founder Nana-Serwa Mancell shares her tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow her lead.

- **Don’t delay, do it now.**
  “Don’t wait to be personally ready to take the leap to launch a product or be an entrepreneur— you may never be ready. Do your research, of course, but just start.”

- **Don’t wait for your idea to be 100% perfect.**
  “Go with your gut. You can fix the rest as you go along— if you try to work it all out perfectly in your head, it may never happen.”

- **Ask for favors.**
  “People are surprisingly more generous than you think, especially fellow entrepreneurs.”

- **Network, network, network.**
  “There are so many untapped worlds out there waiting to offer you so many solutions and opportunities that you won’t even know about until you tap.”

- **Remember that social media is a tactic and not a strategy.**
  “Learn about traditional marketing, understand messaging and objective setting, focus on your growth strategy, and not just the pretty pictures to post.”

- **Look into your red tape before you start.**
  “A year comes so quickly— you will have to be renewing that license fee sooner than you think. I got my business license a full six months before we could legally supply food.”
Being made redundant in her job in the hospitality sector amidst the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 is what led Melody Mok to launch Curious Elephant, a Dubai-based enterprise that makes handcrafted, gourmet Asian sauces that are aimed at bringing the authentic flavors of the Far East to one’s home kitchen in the UAE. But that’s not to say the business she founded is something that came up on the spur of a moment- on the contrary, Mok says her enterprise was actually a long while coming. “I’d always had a dream to start my own business in the food industry, which is where my passion lies,” Mok says. “The concept of Curious Elephant is something that had been brewing in the back of my mind for a few years, but I’d never taken the step to turn it into a reality, due to my 9-5 job.”

Curious Elephant currently sells three different kinds of sauces: these include the Chinese chili oil with Sichuan pepper and peanut, the Vietnamese chili sauce with lemongrass and garlic, and the Malaysian chili sambal with shrimp and kaffir lime. All three have their own particular characteristics, but the one thing uniting them all is the surety that each of them will almost certainly elevate whatever kind of cooking you use them in- and that’s not me who’s saying it, those reviews come from Curious Elephant’s customers. “We officially launched on June 26, 2020 and the response so far has been overwhelmingly positive,” Mok says. “A lot of our customers initially heard about us through social media and from our stall at Ripe Market. Our orders continue to grow month on month, and we are now stocked in three retail outlets across Dubai, with a fourth outlet imminent. We have also done a few special collaborations with other local brands, and the response was so positive that the specials have been turned into permanent products.”

An Australian citizen, Mok admits that the process of kicking off Curious Elephant was quite a strenuous one, with a lot of time spent on research and study. “It was very challenging in the beginning, as setting up a legally-operational business obviously has significant costs associated with it, especially when you are starting out with a brand new concept that doesn’t have any established customer base at all- so, you are starting off with zero revenue, and some significant setup costs,” she explains. “It’s also not only the cost that has to be considered, as the setup process in the UAE is very different to back in Australia, so a lot of hours went into researching the processes, legal requirements, health and safety compliance, municipality requirements, etc. Fortunately, having already been working in the industry in the UAE for six years, I had friends that offered their guidance on certain topics, and also met other people along the way that were in similar phases of starting up, and we were able to support each other.”
The cooperative nature of the F&B entrepreneurial ecosystem in the UAE is something Mok brings up again when talking about the key accomplishments Curious Elephant has had since its inception. “Working on collaborations with other local brands in Dubai has been really special, and it’s really nice to see businesses truly supporting one another during the testing times we’re in,” Mok says. “I think one positive thing to come out of the COVID-19 crisis is that we are really seeing a reversal of globalization, with people going back to ‘supporting local.’” But Mok has also had her work cut out in terms of getting the name of her business out there. “I have always worked in sales management in the hospitality sector, and I therefore understand the importance of being customer-centric—by doing so, you organically achieve word-of-mouth marketing through your client base, and automatically build brand loyalty,” she explains. “It’s a crucial aspect of starting a small business, and it has definitely supported our other unique selling points of offering a one-of-a-kind product in the region, produced locally in Dubai, that is fresh and preservative-free—something that customers are become more and more concerned about these days.”

Mok thus has had her hands full in terms of making sure Curious Elephant remains at the top of the minds of her current clientele, while still prospecting and attracting new ones. “It has been a fun, and at times challenging, journey building a following for our new brand from nothing over the past year,” Mok says. “We’ve had incredible support from food professionals in the industry, and this has turned into organic brand awareness, and a following that we call our ‘elephant herd.’ But it doesn’t stop here, as it’s a continuous job to maintain your existing customer base, and acquire new customers. As the saying goes, ‘out of sight, out of mind.’” But that said, Mok makes it clear that one of the best aspects of her time as an entrepreneur is the interactions she gets to have with her clientele—and that seems to make all the work worthwhile. “I have also really enjoyed meeting our customers in person, and it’s always rewarding when we receive positive feedback from them,” Mok declares. “For me, that is an accomplishment in itself when our customers are happy.”

Curious Elephant founder Melody Mok shares her tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow her lead.

“Learn when to say no.”
“When something doesn’t feel right, it usually isn’t. Our initial plan was to launch Curious Elephant with a different product in the range. Some people said I should just launch it to ‘get going,’ but it just didn’t feel 100% right. I am glad I listened to myself, went back to the drawing board, and took some extra time—we went on to have a really strong launch with our first two products.”

“Be aware of your competition, but don’t be guided by them.”
“People will be drawn to your products or services if you offer something that is unique. Don’t just offer the same product your competitor is offering just because they appear to be successful with it—looks can be deceiving. Think about what the gap in the market really is, and how to do it better or differently to your competitors.”

“Spending less can cost you more.”
“Don’t be tempted to cut every corner than you can, as often, in the long run, it ends up costing you more. Being efficient is very different to cutting corners. Taking shortcuts also often has implications on your end product, and you then risk devaluing your product and brand, which is very difficult to recover later.”
There are donuts—and then there are Crumb & Co. donuts.

Now, I am fully aware that this may sound like an exaggeration, but given that there are multitudes of people in Dubai who are repeating this particular sentence at any given point in time, I hope that you’ll give this statement the benefit of the doubt, and try out the pillowy donuts produced by this small-batch artisanal bakery, and judge them for yourself. Founded by long-term Dubai resident Annika D’Souza, Crumb & Co. has managed to gain a cult following of sorts since it launched amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, with its delectable creations finding favor with anyone who has even the hint of a sweet tooth. “What started out as a hobby during the COVID-19 lockdowns eventually turned into a business,” D’Souza says. “We started out in May 2020 at the peak of lockdown, and we officially launched as a business in August 2020. Our intention at the time was not to start a business, but we were able to do so with the feedback we received and the popularity our products garnered. We will soon have new product launches, and we are excited to see what’s in store for us.”

“What started out as a hobby during the COVID-19 lockdowns eventually turned into a business.”

And if the response to whatever Crumb & Co. has released so far is any indication, then it seems fair to say anything it announces in the future will be gleefully and gladly received by the clientele it enjoys today. Just consider the case of the brand’s light, airy donuts, filled with everything from raspberry jam to passion fruit curd—I can personally attest that trying to restrict yourself to eat only one of them is often an extremely difficult endeavor. And yes, there’s a reason for why Crumb & Co are so droolworthy.
Crumb & Co. founder Annika D’Souza shares her tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow her lead.

**Don’t follow the herd.**
“Stay true to yourself. That will be your competitive edge.”

**Collaborate and cooperate.**
“Network with others in the industry- there is a lot of support within the F&B community.”

**Always be true to what you have built.**
“Stay away from trends when it comes to the product.”

**Consistency is key.**
“Try to remain consistent. It may seem like nothing is working out at times; however, I believe timing is key, and consistency will get you there.”

“We make sure to use the best ingredients without any preservatives or any artificial flavorings in our products,” D’Souza explains. “That coupled with coming up with creative offerings sets us apart. I also believe that being an owner-operated F&B business really helps us stand out in a sea of F&B concepts in Dubai. We’ve been lucky to be able to build up a following through word of mouth and social media. People in the UAE are looking to support local talent, and we are so thankful for that.”

**Support for Crumb & Co. has come from far and wide in the UAE**- D’Souza reveals that one of the highlights of her entrepreneurial journey so far has been to be able to cater to the country’s royal family. And given what D’Souza has been able to achieve with her business in a relatively short period of time, she can well be seen as a role model for other budding F&B entrepreneurs in Dubai and the UAE. When asked about any tips she’d give them, D’Souza replies by telling them to not be disheartened by the technicalities that may be involved in terms of them following their business dreams. “It can be intimidating at first, when it comes to figuring out licensing and operating requirements for a newcomer in the F&B industry in the UAE. However, I recommend speaking to industry professionals and business consultants to figure out that aspect. Where there is a will, there is always a way,” she concludes.

crumbandco.me
E-COMMERCE MADE EASY

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Having been conceptualized in 2018, The Kakao Guy came into being as an enterprise that wanted to be at the top of your minds every time you needed a sweet treat- and founder Mhon Lee chose to name it in a manner that certainly fit that brief. And while the Dubai-based small business was already doing pretty well for itself, The Kakao Guy found its popularity surge amid the COVID-19 crisis in June 2020- and that can be attributed to its launch of two new products during that period. The first of these was its exquisite nama chocolates— in fact, The Kakao Guy is the first local nama chocolate shop in Dubai. “Nama (生, pronounced ‘na-ma’) means raw or fresh in Japanese,” Lee explains. “It’s a type of chocolate ganache, with three basic ingredients: chocolates, fresh cream, and butter. It is a velvety, indulgently rich type of chocolate. The recipe is very simple and straightforward, but the key is using quality ingredients to elevate the taste. When we were doing our research, we found out that no one in Dubai is making nama chocolates locally. We came up with our own recipe and started producing it, and the reception from people for this product has been phenomenal.”

Another of The Kakao Guy’s creations during this period was its interpretation of the San Sebastian cheesecake, also known as the burnt Basque cheesecake, whose origins can be traced back to Spain three decades ago. For those of you who spent your time baking through the lockdowns in the coronavirus pandemic, you might remember this confection as being one of the so-called “quarantine cakes,” and Lee admits that The Kakao Guy’s version falls into the same category— however, he and his team went a step further than their peers in making this sumptuous treat. “Unlike others, we didn’t stop at just doing the classic flavor,” Lee reveals.

Mhon Lee
FOUNDER
THE KAKAO GUY
“When we launched it, we had four flavors right away!” The cake has since proved to be a major hit, with The Kakao Guy having gone on to make monthly specials featuring limited-time flavors. For instance, the company was able to collaborate with fellow Dubai-based F&B startup Project Chaiwala in Ramadan last year to release a burnt cheesecake with the flavor of karak tea. (Also, heads up: The Kakao Guy’s special for August is a luscious peanut butter burnt cheesecake. You’re welcome.)

Now, the appeal of The Kakao Guy’s offerings can be drawn down to just the impeccable delicacies it makes, but that’d be taking away from one of its other key features, which is especially important to consider in our current circumstances where a lot of people are still hurting from the economic repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic. “Our product pricing is affordable,” Lee points out, quite simply. “Our biggest break came in during the quarantine periods of uncertainty, and we want people to be able to celebrate small and big wins with a box of chocolates or a cake. We want to be with people when they feel happy, and they feel the need to share their happiness with others.” With ideologies like these governing the business, The Kakao Guy has thus managed to stand out in the Dubai F&B landscape, which is no small achievement considering how competitive the market is. “For us, it’s about having the right product at the right time,” Lee says. “We are an online shop, and while all the brick-and-mortar shops are trying to move online, we are already here. Word of mouth through Instagram also played a very important role in building our following. Our customers are very engaged and are very happy to share their feedback in social media, and we love to think that we have built a small community with our customers.” And this, at the end of the day, is what makes Lee most proud about launching The Kakao Guy. “I like to think our biggest accomplishment is that The Kakao Guy is becoming a household name,” he says. “It feels great that people think of The Kakao Guy when they want to order quality sweets, without breaking the bank.”

The Kakao Guy founder Mhon Lee shares his tips for wannabe entrepreneurs aiming to follow his lead.

Do your research.
“And this includes everything from identifying the product you want to launch and knowing the market players, to figuring out your targeted customers and identifying your unique selling points. This will play a big difference in standing out in this market.”

Get creative with your customer engagement.
“Be perceptive with interacting with your customers. Every purchase is a personal experience. Take note of what works, and take feedback seriously. Always put yourself in your customer’s shoes.”

Consistency is critical.
“Make sure you deliver the same quality of product, every time. This builds your credibility and reputation, and ultimately determines your bottom line.”

Prioritize flexibility and agility.
“You need to be flexible and agile on the needs of the market and your customers. Always be on your toes, as the market constantly changes.”
“OUR BIGGEST BREAK CAME IN DURING THE QUARANTINE PERIODS OF UNCERTAINTY.”

THE KAKAO GUY IS THE FIRST LOCAL NAMA CHOCOLATE SHOP and the first to make burnt cheesecake in different flavors in Dubai.
At Entrepreneur Middle East, we have typically shied away from referring entrepreneurs with the pseudonyms or nicknames they’ve either taken on or been given through their respective business trajectories- but I’ve decided to make an exception in the case of the husband-and-wife duo behind Viking Bageri, the Dubai-based bakeshop whose signature French baguettes have become the talk of the town. And I am doing this to give due credit to the fact that The Viking and Mrs. Viking have built a brand that’s standing out solely on the strength of its offerings- which, in this case, is, quite simply, brilliantly baked bread. So, while you may not know the real names of The Viking and Mrs. Viking (which, by the way, are Magnus Ericsson and Maria Svedenhov), you’ll still have no qualms about swearing by the baguettes their bakery makes- and that’s definitely something worth applauding.
VIKING BAGERI STARTED OUT amid the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 when Ericsson, who’s the COO of a hospital group in Ajman, found himself at home in Dubai on a weekend, wanting an escape from the busy nature of the work he was exposed to during the rest of the week. As someone who found the process of baking therapeutic in nature, Ericsson—who had grown up watching his father make bread every weekend at home in Sweden—ventured into this domain again in an attempt to de-stress. He set a goal for himself too—to make the one kind of bread his father hadn’t baked: the standard French baguette. “After having tried a few recipes, I found one that I started mixing with, changing the quantities, adding time, or trying another temperature of the water, and so on,” Ericsson recalls. “Being an engineer by trade, I found it quite rewarding to see what happened with the changes I made, and I had quite soon tried all the different flours I could find, as well as salt and yeast... so, yes, I was on my way.”

THE RESULTS of Ericsson’s efforts were beautiful, rustic-looking, golden-brown baguettes, with crispy crusts and airy centers, and they proved to be a definite hit—and it wasn’t just him and his family who were saying so. Neighbors who tried his baguettes were coming back to him asking for more, and Ericsson remembers a period when his wife, Svedenhov, and their children went to Sweden for a holiday, and he found himself baking every single day that fortnight to cater to the demand he was seeing for his bread. But it didn’t end there—they still wanted more. “Once they came back again, I said to my wife, ‘We have people ordering the bread... I’m not sure how to handle this,’” Ericsson recalls. “To which she answered: ‘Well, we’ll have to sort out a website, so people can order properly!’” And that essentially is the moment when Ericsson’s endeavors at home turned into the business that is Viking Bageri today.

The name of the enterprise came about pretty easily—Ericsson’s heritage and height (he’s 6’4” tall) had already earned him the nickname of “The Viking” in his neighborhood, and bageri means “bakery” in Swedish. While Ericsson toiled in the kitchen making the best baguettes he possibly could, Svedenhov (aka Mrs. Viking) worked with their neighbor-cum-friend, Jennifer Bereza, on the other aspects of the business. “We were also able to get the packaging done right in a very early stage,” Ericsson recalls. “Initially I didn’t give it that much of a thought, but Maria and Jennifer tried different versions of kraft and white paper, until they settled for a bit more dense, white paper. The logo type and branding are the brainchildren of Jennifer, and with them sorted out, Maria stayed up into the wee morning hours hand stamping the papers and ribbons that we still, to this day, use for packaging our bread. The perfect bread demands the perfect packaging- and people deserve getting this special feeling of unwrapping a gift when they get our bread.” And their customers certainly seemed to be appreciating everything that Viking Bageri was doing, so much so that at one point, Ericsson and Svedenhov found themselves looking at orders for seven weeks into the future. “We understood then that this was more than a fling, and we started looking to find space in a bakery to allow us to grow,” Ericsson says.
“Somewhere around the same time, we registered the trade license, and signed a contract with the first bakery we were in.” But even as things started getting formalized for it as a business, the homely nature of Viking Bageri remained its main draw for its clientele. “I think that one of the major things that made us stand out was our contact with the customers,” Ericsson says. “For the initial six months (or more, actually), the bread was picked up by the customers, where they all got to meet Mrs. Viking. She knew most of them by first name, and she kept in contact with them throughout the weeks to send out reminders, checking that they still were buying their bread, writing small notes, and so on. This made our customers truly feel that we were a homegrown brand for real. She is still, to this day, involved on a daily basis with our customer relationship management and the back office- we now offer delivery, but many of our customers still get handwritten receipts and notes from Mrs. Viking.”

IT’S THANKS TO SUCH EFFORTS that Viking Bageri can boast of growing organically as a business, with its marketing currently centered on just an Instagram page with a devoted following and a high level of interaction. The company also recently partnered up with the UAE-based KRUSH Brands (the owner and operator of F&B brands like Freedom Pizza, Wildflower Poke & More, Salad Jar, and others), with Ericsson saying the joint venture has helped his enterprise navigate the country’s F&B business ecosystem better. At the same time, the accolades for Viking Bageri have continued to pour in, be it with its inclusion in lists of the UAE’s best bakeries, or with the praise it has received from professional chefs. “But just like William Blake wrote about how to “see a world in a grain of sand,” the true accomplishments can sometimes be the small ones,” Ericsson adds. “These include things like getting videos sent of children enjoying their first baguette, or overhearing people mentioning your brand and how they love your baguettes while you’re out shopping.” But Ericsson says that he remains adamant that all of this doesn’t take away from the singular mission with which he started on this endeavor in the first place. “We have, so far, focused on one thing and one thing only: baguettes,” Ericsson says. “That has allowed us to not settle for anything less than perfection. I started this journey trying to bake the best baguette in Dubai, and that goal still stands today.” vikingbageri.com
FUN COMES GUARANTEED

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ON THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 2021, at Sofitel Dubai The Obelisk, key players from the MENA region’s foodtech ecosystem came together for the inaugural Leaders in Foodtech Awards 2021, an event staged by Entrepreneur Middle East to showcase the individuals and enterprises that are shaping the future of this dynamic industry.

With the support of Tech Partner Life On Screen, Ecosystem Partner in5 Dubai, and Media Partner Hotel and Catering News Middle East, the Leaders in Foodtech Awards 2021 was able to bring together the movers and shakers of an industry that is predicted to be globally worth over US$342 billion by 2027.

With the winners ranging from innovative food delivery solutions to enterprising entrepreneurs who have quickly pivoted to the new highly digitized world, the awards were a celebration of the MENA region’s foodtech ecosystem, showcasing the individuals and companies one needs to keep an eye on as we move into the future.
BEST NEWCOMER KITCH-IN
MOST INNOVATIVE FOOD DELIVERY SOLUTION RADYES
MOST INNOVATIVE FOODTECH SOLUTION FOODICS
MOST INNOVATIVE AGRITECH SOLUTION FARMIN
BEST TECHNOLOGY IN DAIRY PRODUCTION MARMUM DAIRY FARM
BEST FOODTECH SOLUTION DELIVERECT
BEST HEALTHY FOODTECH SOLUTION THE BROTH LAB
BEST SOLUTION FOR F&B OUTLETS FOODICS
BEST TECHNOLOGY PROVIDER FOR F&B LYVE GLOBAL
OUTSTANDING MARKETING SOLUTION OF THE YEAR EXPIN
BEST FOODTECH CONCEPT THE CONCEPT
BEST FOOD APP OF THE YEAR MUNCH:ON
FRESH PRODUCE FOODTECH OF THE YEAR FARMBOX
FOODTECH STARTUP OF THE YEAR GRUBTECH
FOODTECH COMPANY OF THE YEAR KAYKROO
FOODTECH LEADER OF THE YEAR JIHAD EL-EIT

WINNERS of the Leaders in Foodtech 2021

WISSAM YOUNANE,
CEO, BNC Publishing
LEADERS IN FOODTECH 2021

KATIE OVERY, EMCEE

BEST FOODTECH SOLUTION Deliverect

BEST SOLUTION FOR F&B OUTLETS | MOST INNOVATIVE FOODTECH SOLUTION Foodics

FOODTECH LEADER OF THE YEAR Jihad El Eit

KATIE OVERY, EMCEE
BEST TECHNOLOGY PROVIDER FOR F&B | Lyve Global

MOST INNOVATIVE FOOD DELIVERY SOLUTION | Radyes

BEST FOODTECH CONCEPT | The Concept

BEST NEWCOMER | Kitch In
LEADERS IN FOODTECH 2021

BEST FOOD APP OF THE YEAR: Munch-On

FOODTECH STARTUP OF THE YEAR: Grubtech

FOODTECH COMPANY OF THE YEAR: Kaykroo

MOST INNOVATIVE AGRITECH SOLUTION: Farmin

BEST TECHNOLOGY IN DAIRY PRODUCTION: Marmum Dairy Farm
FRESH PRODUCE FOODTECH OF THE YEAR
Farmbox

BEST HEALTHY FOODTECH SOLUTION
The Broth Lab

OUTSTANDING MARKETING SOLUTION OF THE YEAR
Expin
Amplifying Success

Elie Milky, Vice President – Development for the Radisson Hotel Group in the Middle East, Cyprus, Greece, and Pakistan, on the hotel group’s plans for its future in the region

As Vice President – Development for the Radisson Hotel Group in the Middle East, Cyprus, Greece, and Pakistan, Elie Milky has been tasked with growing the global hospitality enterprise’s various brands (i.e. Radisson Blu, Radisson, Park Inn by Radisson, Radisson Individuals, Radisson RED, and Radisson Collection) in the markets that he governs. In an interview with Entrepreneur Middle East, Milky offered a glimpse into how the Group has been navigating the business landscape after the effects of the global coronavirus pandemic— and how it’s poised to steal the show in the months and years ahead. Excerpts from an interview:

As Radisson Hotel Group moves into “the new normal,” has the recent trend of entrepreneurship influenced the way your business is run today? When catering to the market as it stands currently, how important is innovation in all that you do?

With daily changes, we need to be resilient but also flexible and open-minded to overcome this pandemic— and these are definitely traits of entrepreneurship. One of Radisson Hotel Group’s core beliefs is “we are many minds, with one mindset”— this time has most certainly proven that we need to exercise this philosophy and stand together, as we are all faced with common challenges.

While every industry and every business is different, it’s critical that organizations reinvent and redefine themselves and the way in which they work in the new world. We must change how we think and work and adapt to the new norm of business. As we rethink where and how business is done, it creates the opportunity for organizations of all sizes to advance and achieve their goals while reinventing their strategy, looking at new innovations and technology, experiencing a more flexible work culture, reducing their carbon footprint and enhancing diverse talent recruitment.

Being flexible and innovative will be key moving forward. Looking at the recent launch of Hybrid Meetings or Radisson Individuals, Radisson Hotel Group has shown a readiness to be innovative and explore new opportunities. Through-out 2020, we have continued investing in our systems and increased digital infrastructure with online and express check in and out, and we accelerated the launch of our new Hybrid Meetings and Hybrid Rooms Solutions, and we quickly put the full infrastructure in place to launch within a matter of weeks.

What are some of the plans Radisson Hotel Group has in terms of its future offerings within the region?

There has been a lot of talks in the recent months about the resilience of serviced apartments, amidst the pandemic. Whilst we can continue talking about this hospitality offering and its appeal, it is important to remember that this product is not new to the industry, but rather how its success has only been magnified by the current situation. Serviced apartments as a product was already established as a mainstream lodging proposition in its own right for at least 10 years, and in some markets, longer. While serviced apartments were previously a mainstay of the corporate life, today’s market has led to an increased demand, with more and more people exploring the long-stay life.

Over the last 7-8 years, global supply has increased by approximately 20%. Looking at other markets we can see
that the product is well established in North America—a market that features 60% of the global supply, followed by 15% in Europe, and a small share that stands below 5% in the Middle East and Africa. The Asia Pacific region holds the remaining 20% of the supply. Currently, the fastest growth is taking place in Europe with the UK, France and Germany heading up the continent, followed by the Middle East region, where UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are have taken the lead.

For investors, serviced apartments are an exciting product holding a lot of promise. The main reasons for this are the lower investment and operational risks generated by higher occupancy levels, healthy average rates, and gross operating profit (GOP) margins that average at least 10 percentage points more than hotel GOP levels. When looking at it from an investor or entrepreneurial mind, all of these factors speak for the hospitality real estate, making it even more interesting.

Does the new Radisson Individuals brand fit the requirements of the Middle East traveler and investor, and what are your plans for it within the region?

For us at Radisson Hotel Group, our focus remains on adjusting our short- and long-term plans to cope with the rapid changes, allowing us to find proactive solutions for our owners and investors. Over the past months, we have continued to work towards becoming more relevant to changing owner needs, and to remaining one of the best conversion-friendly partners in the industry. Radisson Individuals is our response to a market that is becoming relatively mature and as a conversion solution for unique, independent hotels and serviced apartments looking to benefit from a brand affiliation, and we are about to announce the launch of this brand in the region very soon. This affiliation proposition is also for owners looking to brand their properties under one of our core brands, where they could benefit from our affiliation while they undergo a renovation.

How severely has the pandemic affected Radisson’s business within the region, and are investors still looking at hospitality, or has it raised concerns?

Hospitality real estate is a unique asset class that can be dissected into different types of investment models for investors to choose from. Investing in a luxury hotel in Dubai or in Doha or even in Muscat, for instance, may be risky due to oversupply within that category. Investors should be able to identify gaps within the hospitality investment landscape such as affordable lifestyle hotels in most markets of the region, a scale of budget and midscale hotels across major cities, affordable beach resorts in saturated markets, branded serviced apartments in most countries, and the list goes on.

I personally have not seen a drop in investor interest overall. It may be a temporary drop in building a new hotel in a saturated market, or another five-star in a market flooded with five-star city hotels. There may have been delays in openings, but that is mostly driven by airport closures leading to supplies and equipment not reaching the hotels on time, and by waiting for the lockdowns to be lifted. What I have seen is these investors are rushing to open properties to benefit from the post-pandemic boom. More investments are going into resorts and serviced apartments, as these products lead the recovery across regions. More independent operations are looking now more than ever to brand their hotels as a result of the standards, hygiene and distribution reach brands offer.

What are some of the mid-long term expansion plans that Radisson has in the pipeline for the Middle East?

The Middle East is a key development area and our ambitions across the region have remained the same. In the past months we have announced the opening of the Radisson Hotel Dubai Damac Hills and the Radisson Blu Hotel, Riyadh Qurtuba.

Looking ahead at Q3 and Q4, we aim to open three additional hotels in Riyadh, and another recently signed property in Jeddah, as well as announce our entry into Ras Al Khaimah with the 408-key Radisson resort. We expect 2022 and 2023 to witness more signings and openings as we tap into various conversion opportunities in the market, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

We remain committed to our ambitious five-year plan and our mission to be recognized as one of the top three hotel companies in the world and the group of choice for owners, guests, and talent. Agility and flexibility, while still delivering profitability needed, are going to be critical for everybody to succeed.
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Power With Purpose

THE FOUR PILLARS OF LEADERSHIP by VIJAY ESWARAN

LEADERSHIP IS NOT A TITLE. You can never be appointed a leader, whatever your business card may say. Leadership has to be earned. Certain individuals have the ability to impact the lives of others with their action, insights and words. The late Steve Jobs said it best: “Leadership is about inspiring people to do things they never thought they could.”

People like Mahatma Gandhi, who led a non-violence movement and drove the British colonizers out of India, or Dr. Martin Luther King, who inspired an entire generation of African Americans to march for their civil rights, did not hold any specific leadership title or government position. Their drive and passion for a cause bigger than themselves inspired others to follow them.

I believe that a leader possesses four innate characteristics. While some people are born with these traits, others take the time to learn and apply them.
LEADERS TAKE OWNERSHIP

Most people settle comfortably into the lives and roles into which they are born. They live mediocre, mundane lives, and never get to realize their potential. Then there are those who stand out for challenging the status quo, for seeking to better themselves and the environment in which they are. The ones who refused to accept the cards they are dealt with, and seek to change the game. Real leaders take ownership for their lives. They do not let others define their path, or allow circumstances to prevent them from taking the next steps in their lives. Leaders also take ownership of the people and the environment that they step into. But that doesn’t mean leaders do everything themselves. Good leaders have mastered the art of delegation. A common mistake many leaders make is to relegate instead of delegate. When you relegate, you abandon your responsibility. When you delegate, your help shape the outcome, though someone else implements the actual task. You are still accountable for the result. Ownership is a driving force of accountability. Hence, it is crucial to remember that the delegation is of tasks, and not the responsibility.

LEADERS EMPOWER

We, as a human race, have an innate desire to belong. To belong to a community, a class, a culture. History shows us that this drive to belong often manifests itself as a yearning to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Thus, when a leader comes along showing us a path to being better not just as individuals, but also as a part of something greater as a group, they raise in others a sense of self-belief. This self-belief is, in essence, true empowerment. Self-belief helps creates that bridge from where we are to where we could be and should be. A great leader knows how to raise others up and empower them to believe in themselves. A leader is not measured by how much they have themselves advanced, but rather by how well they have advanced the lives of others. Most often than not, failure is simply a result of lack of self-belief. A leader helps create that belief by challenging the standards people are used to, and shaking them out of their comfort zone.

LEADERS ARE PURPOSE-DRIVEN

A leader is defined by a purpose that is bigger than themselves. When that purpose serves a greater good, it becomes the platform for great leadership. Gandhi summed up his philosophy of life with these words: “My life is my message.” That one statement speaks volumes about how he chose to live his life and share his message of non-violence, compassion, and truth with the world. When you have a purpose that goes beyond you, people will see it and identify with it. Being purpose-driven defines the nobility of one’s character. It inspires others. At its core, your leadership purpose springs from your identity, the essence of who you are. Purpose is the difference between a salesman and a leader, and in the end, the leader is the one that makes the impact on the world.

LEADERS CARE

The earmark of a great leader is their care and concern for their people. Displaying compassion towards others is not about a photo-op, but an inherent characteristic that others can feel and hear when they are with you. It lives in the warmth and timbre of your voice. It shows in every action you take. Caring leaders take a genuine interest in others. They strive to better know the people working with them. This is not just to make token enquiries from time to time, but because they really want to know their people and encourage them to be the best they can be. When care is genuine, it is interwoven in everything that you do.

As history has shown, dictators, warlords, and conquerors such as Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan may have led massive armies, but upon their death, no one remembers their life’s message. Instead, they are only remembered by the lands they conquered. On the other hand, historical leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela were defined by the care they showed for their people. Their legacies have impacted the belief systems through which we operate and govern our daily lives, even today. To me, this meaningful legacy, rooted in compassion, is what makes a great leader.

Vijay Eswaran is the Founder and Executive Chairman of the QI Group of Companies, a multinational conglomerate headquartered in Hong Kong. A well-known thought leader and philanthropist, he has written and spoken extensively about business, leadership, personal development, and life management. vijayswaran.com
Digital Transformation Means Little Without Leadership

As the world continues to grapple with the challenges of an evolving pandemic, digital transformation presents organizations with a historic need for resilient leadership

by AMNAH AJMAL

The benefits of digital technologies are well-documented. Yet, the real competitive advantage for an organization lies in how well-equipped its people are to get the most out of the digital tools they are given. This journey requires curiosity, enthusiasm, and nuanced leadership: technology is merely an enabler—not an end in itself.

If digital transformation is as much about changing habits, skills, and behaviors, it definitely also means transforming how we engage with employees and how we foster innovation. A starting point must be to shift leadership away from a hands-off autocratic model towards one that is hands-on, humble, empathetic, and curious.

It is argued that with such a sudden and unplanned shift to remote working as we’ve encountered, empathy and building trust have never been so important. For large organizations that may have been making progress in their digital transformations before the COVID-19 crisis, the unexpected (and enforced) isolation of employees came out of nowhere.

Adapting to a crisis

Immediate questions are raised: how do we make sure our employees are psychologically happy, and in the right frame of mind to work? How can we ensure that the new digital tools we have invested in are doing what they were intended to do in the context of a pandemic? And how do we know that our people are using them to their own benefit: to work smarter in a new world of professional separation?

Meeting the needs of employees in the middle of a crisis requires, perhaps more than anything else, agility and an understanding that in isolation, human beings are subject to a significant changes in their daily circumstances and frame of mind.

A dedicated employee may perform well in the first week of remote working, but how do we react by the end of week four, or six months down the line? Do we have the tools as leaders to deliver the nuanced support our colleagues may need? Are we able to guide employees through digital transformation from afar, and can we create new connections without physical proximity? Are we able to challenge ourselves and change our own modus operandi when old ways fail? Part of the solution lies in letting go.

If we can leave behind old ways of working—with an open mind—we can lead the enthusiastic adoption of new digital tools and raise awareness of the benefits of digital transformation. When we are emotionally and professionally invested in the digital tools ourselves, we can lead their widespread adoption so that we deliver the customer journey that our digital strategies are intended to create. This is crucially important.

Collaboration and inclusivity

We must establish and nurture human connections if we are to achieve the corporate goals we set out— and if we are to make the social and economic impacts that we strive to achieve. For an organization like Mastercard, this means bridging the digital divide, and contributing to inclusive growth through innovation, technology, and a human-centric approach.

However, driving this level of change in the context of a global human crisis requires sharp focus and dedicated execution. If we are to guarantee that the customer reaps the rewards of the innovations that Mastercard delivers, we, as leaders, have to understand our teams and their unique circumstances and challenges, so that they, in turn, can utilize the tools we have created to stay close to our customers.

This is important because when deployed to their full potential, digital payment solutions can instantly solve a customer or merchant pain point and, in doing so, unleash growth potential and opportunities. It is clear that, as we navigate a new world, we have a new opportunity to spearhead inclusive growth by reaching the financially underserved—but this requires a collaborative and bold approach.

By adapting how we lead, we can foster an ecosystem that makes a measurable, positive impact on the communities we serve. Through partnerships, technologies, and robust leadership, we can make the digital transformation work for everybody, help close the digital divide, and make the world a more inclusive place.

Amnah Ajmal is the Executive Vice President, Market Development, Middle East and Africa for Mastercard. mastercard.ae
Tell us a little bit about yourself and the business that you lead. I have been CEO at the Swiss Hospitality Company (SHC) since 2014, and I’m also a board member of various organizations all focused on human capital development in Saudi Arabia. SHC, specifically, is a leading Saudi-based firm, specialized in advisory and consulting in the area of tourism and hospitality for human capital development. We work with Saudi government, semi-government, and private entities to develop human capital in tourism and hospitality, driven by a quite simple but powerful concept: a development built around Swiss hospitality standards, combined with Saudi cultural values. Focused on tourism and hospitality, we support the achievement of workforce planning and development designed by Vision 2030.

As an enterprise in Saudi Arabia, how are you and your entity embracing Vision 2030? Tourism and hospitality is indeed a crucial aspect of Vision 2030, one of the main pillars for the new Saudi economy, and a fundamental success factor for establishing a tourism economy locally.
Saudi Arabia is going to need one million people for tourism and hospitality as a country; so far, we are developing programs for around 100,000 of those people.

We are extremely active on a number of different projects that Vision 2030 boosted over the last years thanks to Saudi Arabia Crown Prince HRH Mohammed bin Salman’s directions. According to the progression of each project, we classify the workforce gap according to three different layers:

- **THE IMMEDIATE NEEDS**, like the tourism and hospitality projects having human capital needs today (such as the ones opening over the next months in need of qualified workforce)

- **THE MID-TERM ONES**, like for example a hotel that is in a pre-opening phase (so opening in the next 6-12 months) and so needing to recruit local specialized staff

- **THE LONG-TERM PROJECTS**, which are mainly the Public Investment Fund’s (PIF) gigaprojects, i.e. the most important projects in the Kingdom, like Qiddiya, Red Sea, NEOM, Amaala, Diriyah Gate Development Authority (DGDA), for example, where we are supporting workforce planning for the end of 2023 or 2024, designing for them a set of programs fulfilling their specific human capital needs.

What are the key changes you are seeing when it comes to the business landscape in Saudi Arabia today?

In the last 15 years, Saudi Arabia was not embracing tourism, although, our culture is very oriented to hospitality. Hospitality is in our DNA as Saudis; we are now leveraging on our culture to make hospitality and tourism real career paths.

One of the top priority programs we are about to launch, for example, is the Saudi Tourism Apprenticeship Program. Together with Olivier Harnisch, Head of PIF Hospitality, we designed a six-month intensive training dedicated to young nationals offering them the opportunity to learn front office, food and beverage, sales and marketing, finance and accounting in a very practical and operational way, so as to get the qualifications ranging from “skilled worker” to “para professional.”

What are the kind of opportunities you are offering to Saudi people willing to join the tourism and hospitality industry?

We are in the middle of a huge national transformation: at a company level and at a government level, our mission is supporting the tourism human capital ecosystem to grow and become a global leading entity. The ecosystem is involving local partners, including non-profit organizations, and also international ones, such as the United Nations, the World Tourism Organization, the Swiss Hospitality Company, and the Ministry of Tourism.

In a nutshell, three are our strategic objectives:

- **Creating jobs** by generating a local and international professional career journeys to our people
- **Offering our female workforce** the opportunity of joining the tourism and hospitality industry
- **Generating awareness** about the image of the industry: 90% of hotel general managers have been reception operators or waiters at the beginning of their careers, but that is just a starting point.

We are, indeed, providing Saudi nationals not only with the opportunity of working in their own country, but also to export, in the long term, our hospitality values internationally.

As the leader of a business in Saudi Arabia, what are the things that keep you up at night?

As I mentioned before, generating awareness about the meaning of creating a new industry and the consequences of it is a significant challenge. This means infusing the population –kids, parents, teachers, families, business owners, and, in general, the citizens- that such a huge transformation can happen only with a significant mindset shift. Tourism and hospitality can really represent a great opportunity for our people in the future– being able to leverage on it means to learn a new set of skills, tools, practice and theory from scratch; something totally new to the Kingdom’s population.

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**Raffaella Campagnoli** is the founder and Managing Director of LIRA Strategy Partners.

With over 20 years of experience in strategy consulting in international firms, she was formerly the Managing Director at Accenture Strategy Middle East and Turkey for nine years. Raffaella left Accenture after 13 years at the company, during which she led transformation programs in multiple regions (Europe, US, Turkey, Singapore, Middle East), specialized in digital transformation of organizations, zero based budgeting, strategic planning, operating model transformation, consumer products goods, and retail, thereby developing a trusted network of partners and experienced professionals.

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“Saudi Arabia is going to need one million people for tourism and hospitality as a country; so far, we are developing programs for around 100,000 of those people.”

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Championing Change

UAE-based electric vehicle manufacturer **One Moto** is ready to take on the world by **PAMELLA DE LEON**

In 2018, Adam Ridgway launched One Moto, an electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer offering a fleet of vehicles such as electric motorcycles, bikes, scooters, delivery and grocery vans, catering to the last-mile industry as well as urban commuters.
s the demand for online delivery gains traction, there’s a sharp increase in the use of two-wheelers for last-mile delivery purposes. With that, a plethora of issues arise too: exhausted delivery drivers, questionable safety gear, battered bikes, and of course, its dire impact on the environment, among other factors. In 2016, Adam Ridgway, a motorcycle license holder in Dubai for the past 13 years, saw these problematic factors too: “I walked out of a car garage, and I saw a spectrum of delivery bikes awaiting service, and I went to inspect them. Some were 4-5 years old, with several hundred thousand kilometers on the clock, and I started wondering if anyone had an electric delivery bike.” Ridgway started researching online about this, including what Tesla was pioneering in its market, and he soon ended up discovering a potential business opportunity that he felt was worth tapping into, both locally and globally.

“Although motorcycles produce less carbon dioxide, they produce a thousand times more carbon monoxide [and] hydrocarbons... In fact, 15,000 delivery motorcycles in Dubai produce 16,560 tons of carbon dioxide each year, which would take 273,000 trees grown for 10 years to sequester—that’s over 21,000 acres of forest that could have been saved, which is 42 times the size of Downtown Dubai.” But it’s not just about the environment—Ridgway and his team are keeping an eye out for the safety and welfare of the riders of the company’s vehicles too. In fact, Ridgway even took primary research duties by getting firsthand experience of being a real-life delivery rider, and interviewing delivery riders to learn about their numerous issues, such as how riders pay for their own fuel, increased working hours and delivery targets. The results were analyzed to showcase the real-time cost-savings and increased profitability with the enterprise’s EVs, as well as to ensure that the company’s solutions are focused on the riders.

Currently, One Moto has several revenue streams, consisting of sales, leasing, data subscriptions, battery-as-a-service, franchises, aftermarket and parts. It also offers a package of replacing the vehicle manufacturer offering a fleet of vehicles such as electric motorcycles, bikes, scooters, delivery and grocery vans, catering to the last-mile industry, as well as urban commuters.

Bringing it to the market wasn’t an easy feat—Ridgway started by validating the concept’s market potential, with his efforts in this regard including contacting MENA ride-hailing app Careem to discuss opportunities, asking potential customers firsthand what they needed from a delivery motorcycle, as well as collaborating with former colleagues to develop an electronic delivery motorcycle.

The R&D phase began in the UK, alongside a small team of two in the UAE, which resulted in a “road-worthy” prototype built for the UAE market, with various factors considered, such as weather conditions, battery tech, range, speed, safety, and telematics. The team tested the bikes daily for three months during the summer, and then set out to get the vehicles approved. “Being a first-mover came with its challenges, as it was the first time Dubai’s Road and Transport Authority (RTA) and the UAE’s Emirates Authority for Standardization and Metrology (ESMA) had undergone this implementation,” Ridgway recalls. “18 months later, we were set, fully certified to European standards, then received the certifications from the UAE government—we were set to champion change.”

Ridgway’s research had showcased the carbon footprint that typical motorcycles leave on the environment which was a problem that he and his team aimed to solve with One Moto’s EVs. “Did you know that motorcycles are 16 times more harmful to the environment than sport utility vehicles (SUVs) or buses, and that in their second year of usage, this increases to 50 times?” he asks.

“Our vision is 100 cities by 2025, one million vehicles sold, investments back into this world.”

From setting up his first small business at the age of 16 in the UK, to stints in the broadcast journalism world in London and Dubai, and then onward to launching the award-winning creative collective group, Mediacubed, in 2008, Ridgway isn’t new to taking leaps into the unknown. Imbued by the vision of how the last-mile industry would accelerate more than ever (and by an innate urge to make a social impact, which was bolstered by the fact that he was soon to become a father), Ridgway was thus driven to address issues in the sector as an entrepreneur. In 2018, Ridgway launched One Moto, an electric vehicle (EV)
for free after five years and recycling the replaced parts, as well as a focus on the rider’s well-being, with its data-driven vehicle telemetry and ergonomic design to alleviate health issues. However, Ridgway notes that the industry is constantly changing, and so his business has evolved with it. “A company driving to succeed needs agility at all times, unrivaled focus, and an ambitious team. One Moto is the first to market, yet it won’t last. We are leading a global market with the performance and specs of our vehicles [and] technology advances.” He elaborates, “Our vision is 100 cities by 2025, one million vehicles sold, investments back into this world we live in, bringing change (not waiting for it to happen), reducing fatalities, increasing earnings, helping those who cannot afford a vehicle own one, and leaving this planet in a slightly better condition than the one we currently live in. We can’t change the past, however, the future [is in our hands].”

Ridgway and his team’s hustling spirit is undeterred—so far, the venture’s clientele has included Jumeirah, Sarood Hospitality, as well as other partners, such as supermarket chains, food delivery aggregators, logistics companies, and even a UAE ruling family member. With its factory in Asia, the team is exploring manufacturing opportunities in the UAE, India, KSA, Australia, Africa and Europe. “[In] each territory we operate, we will build collaborative micro-facilities,” Ridgway adds. While One Moto is already active in the UAE, UK, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia, the venture also recently announced its launch in India. In partnership with CS Group, the enterprise is starting its aggressive expansion plan with 13 territories to start, with flagship stores in each city, micro-dealerships, and a service network. And that’s not all—the venture is awaiting its debut in Australia too.

The past year has been a defining year for the homegrown brand, as not only did the team work relentlessly to highlight opportunities to its customers, but according to Ridgway, it also became the year the company entered the “raise maze.” Ridgway was adamant about not falling into the trap of other EV ventures—which were basically raising capital and valuations, yet years later, still not producing a vehicle. “We did the opposite: build, sell, prove, then raise.” The entrepreneur made use of equity crowdfunding platform Eureeca to raise funds for his business, with Ridgway saying, “We agreed on an US$8 million pre-money valuation, and raised around $500,000. We now have one team of investors on the holding company cap table who are supporting the growth of the business and their investments through referrals.” However, Ridgway reveals that he and his team are already looking at fundraising again. “We have started talks about our pre-series A raise of $10 million at $60 million pre-money, which will be invested into local manufacturing, further accelerating the R&D of our new (industry-changing) EVs, and enhancing the tech side of our operation,” he notes.

With his eyes sets on a potential Series A in 2022, Ridgway believes in the power of internally manifesting his ambitious goals. “The next three years will define just how unobtainable the possibilities were,” he declares, while noting that he and his team are gearing up for a long ride ahead. “We are focused on working with the government of the UAE to bring change to the last-mile industry for the better, focus on the welfare of the riders and drivers in the sector, being a positive influence on the environment, and bring change,” he concludes.

'TREP TALK
Adam Ridgway / Founder and CEO, One Moto

What are the challenges of being a solo entrepreneur, and how do you go about tackling the journey? How do you stay passionate as an entrepreneur and avoid burnout?

“The greatest challenge is having to ‘solve’ the questions yourself. Think of the entire plans and junctions of possibilities, and this can lead to burn out. Having the right team around you avoids this tremendously— but take your time to employ slowly. If it takes months or years to find the right person, then welcome that. Staying passionate isn’t in question. If you find something you love, something with purpose, and give it all you’ve got for as long as you can, you’ll be successful. Sounds a little romantic; however, I truly believe this. If you are currently forcing something to happen, think about how long this has been the case, then listen to a stranger— what would they say? Don’t be afraid of failure, or indeed change— but, yes, it’s easier to say than embrace. There was a quote I heard a few years ago at a time when I needed to hear it: “Sometimes a salmon needs to stop fighting its way up the river, and just go with the flow.”
With arid lands and low rainfall characterizing a large majority of the UAE's terrain, the country's agricultural sector has had to find innovative and sustainable ways to increase food production over the years. The UAE has been noted to import around 85% of its food, with the value of food imports reaching AED17.98 billion in the first quarter of 2020— a statistic that also highlights its dependence on other countries in this regard. What all of this indicates is the UAE's need for farming techniques that can enable more local produce, and thereby ensure an efficient food supply chain in the country. One solution could be vertical farming, a farming technique that grows crops in vertically stacked surfaces, as opposed to the traditional method of growing crops on a vast open field. Vertical farming also ensures that there is minimal to no usage of pesticides or fertilizers, and it is carried out in indoor locations like greenhouses— an alternative that is particularly helpful for farming in challenging environmental conditions like that of the UAE.

Launched in 2013, Dubai-based Alesca Life Technologies (which also has offices located in Tokyo and Beijing) is an agritech company that specializes in vertical farming. "Alesca develops precision farming solutions and turnkey indoor vertical farms to improve the productivity, efficiency, and predictability of food production by up to 10 times," says co-founder and CEO Stuart Oda. According to Oda, one of the key issues his startup is aiming to solve is a lack of standardization in the food supply chain. "Food production is highly disconnected from end consumers and lacks operational standardization, and this is leading to major..."
logistical, environmental, safety, and accessibility issues,” he explains.

“Alesca’s precision farming solutions significantly increase the yield and operational consistency of farms by automating all critical on-farm functions, and our indoor vertical farms are capable of producing highly nutritious and highly profitable fresh produce and horticultural products year-round in any location to address food security issues.”

There is already an increasing focus on sustainable industry practices in the UAE, with initiatives such as the UAE Vision 2021 and the UAE Energy Strategy 2050 setting a 50% target for clean energy in the nation. In light of this, it is also important to highlight Alesca Life Technologies’ contribution to reducing pollution and waste.

“Alesca’s indoor vertical farms use 90-99% less water, fertilizer, and land compared to conventional farms and do not require any chemical pesticides or GMO seeds,” explains Oda. “All of the agricultural inputs and environmental conditions are controlled in the indoor vertical farm to ensure the best quality product is grown every crop cycle.” Currently, Alesca Life Technologies has indoor farm installations located across China, Singapore, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. These installations range from small cabinet-style micro-farms that cater to hotel groups, to large container farms that are used for multinational companies and residential real estate developers. “Agricultural technology is one of the most multi-disciplinary industries, and we have team members that have expertise in everything from hardware and software development to plant science and farm operations,” adds Oda.

Looking toward the future, Oda says that his startup is on track to announce a few important launches soon. “Our team will be launching mega-scale indoor farms for government and corporate customers across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe over the next 12 months to enable hyper-local, pesticide-free food production in regions that face challenges with food security,” he says. Wait and watch!

**TREP TALK**

Stuart Oda / Co-founder and CEO, Alesca Life Technologies

What have been the biggest challenges and benefits you’ve seen in doing business in Dubai?

“Alesca’s formal engagement in the UAE and GCC region started in 2016 through our selection into the inaugural cohort of the Dubai Future Accelerator (DFA) program. The support and introductions we received from the Dubai Future Foundation (DFF) during the program were instrumental in our early success, and we’re proud to be the first global DFA company that established an onshore joint venture in Dubai. We’ve actively engaged with the DFF and DFA community over the years, and they’ve helped amplify our message in the region and connect us to key strategic partnerships.

Being based in the Emirates has been helpful from a business development perspective. We’ve had countless government and corporate partners from the Middle East, Europe, and Africa visit our operations in Dubai, and we’ve been able to establish critical manufacturing partnerships to serve our customers in the GCC region. Having a strong local presence in the Emirates has helped us convince our customers and partners that Alesca is committed to the region for the long-term.”

You and your startup are a part of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund (MBRIF) accelerator program- how would you describe your experience through it?

“Alesca joined the MBRIF program looking to launch pilot projects with government ministries and corporate partners in the agriculture and food security sectors and real estate development, food retail/processing, and hotel/hospitality industries. The MBRIF program has a deep network across the GCC region and made critical introductions to support our customers in the GCC region. Having a strong local presence in the Emirates has helped us convince our customers and partners that Alesca is committed to the region for the long-term.”
Developing an e-commerce platform comes with a number of obstacles, including how to store products in a way that ensures that they can be dispatched in a timely manner, as and when customer orders come in. To cater to this issue, Dubai-based startup Shorages was created by Rayan Osseiran in 2019. Defined as an “e-commerce fulfillment center,” Shorages offers on-demand warehousing and storage services that enable e-commerce platforms to quickly grow and scale their businesses in the Middle East.

Shorages' business model is quite straightforward and simple to understand. In essence, it negates the need for any e-commerce business, regardless of its size, to rent out a warehouse specifically for storing its inventory. Osseiran further adds that his startup provides an efficient alternative to traditional storage options. “Traditional distributors and logistics warehouses are not designed for modern day e-commerce operations,” he says. “Brands that want to sell online across the GCC face the problem of setting up a local presence for their online operations. Not only is this expensive, but also time-consuming. This is where Shorages comes into play! We help brands and online sellers spend less time and money in launching, by handling the storage and fulfillment requirements for them.”

The products, which are sent over by the e-commerce companies Shorages works with, can be stored at any of its facilities across the GCC on a monthly payment basis. The startup also offers services like branded packaging, delivery to any location worldwide, as well as inventory count. “This enables global and local brands to instantly start selling online in the region through a direct-to-consumer approach,” adds Osseiran. “It also offers customers a better journey by enabling next-day delivery, cash on delivery, returns, and lower shipping costs compared to orders being shipped from abroad.” The direct-to-consumer approach that Osseiran alludes to is particularly interesting, because it enables individuals who sell through non-traditional channels, such as Shopify or Instagram, to also avail of these services and scale their businesses.

Another point to be noted is that the startup's technology can easily integrate with diverse storefronts.

“Having the right financial controls in place was essential to sustain a business during the economic hardships that plagued the local and global market.”
and websites, which entails that customer orders that come in on a particular e-commerce platform or website are immediately linked and updated on the Shorages platform as well. This ensures that there is no unnecessary time lag between the order placement and the delivery dispatch, and in turn enables seamless inventory management. “This is all made possible through Shorages’ proprietary order fulfillment technology which aims at centralizing orders coming through different online channels, such as a website or marketplaces like Amazon and Noon,” Osseiran explains. The startup is currently a team of 10, and has already serviced over 70 clients selling items ranging from cosmetics and fashion to electronics and home equipment. “To date, we have been financed by an angel investor, and we expect 2021 to be the year where we become profitable,” concludes Osseiran.

What have been the biggest challenges and benefits you’ve seen in doing business in Dubai?
“The two largest hurdles we faced while growing the company were regulations and access to finance. When it came to regulations, it was very expensive for us to set up the company and obtain the necessary licenses, visa allocations, leases, and other pre-approvals required to do business in the UAE. On top of that, lack of access to financing made it more difficult to get these approvals and to afford the capex that comes with starting a business. Unfortunately, this region lags behind when it comes to the availability of angel and seed funds. This is the case particularly to individuals, such as myself, who are new to the UAE scene and don’t have a track record or reputed backer within the ecosystem. This meant that we had to work twice as hard on a fraction of the budget to grow a sustainable business.

That said, the key benefit of working within the UAE is the fact that it has become the go-to hub for a lot of brands and businesses that want to enter the GCC/Middle East market. Security, purchasing power, and seamless trade have made the UAE a primary choice for international companies. This is great for us because it means that there are more opportunities. Additionally, the UAE recognizes its position as a potential e-commerce trade hub that services the region, and is building products to accommodate for that demand.”

You and your startup are a part of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund (MBRIF) accelerator program- how would you describe your experience through it?
“The MBRIF accelerator program was an eye-opening experience for us, as it exposed us to a lot of knowledge across several functions within the business. We got to hear and learn from industry experts within those functions and frame our business strategy accordingly. Attending these sessions was very refreshing and certainly gave us the helicopter view we needed to strategize our way forward.”
Elmenus, an Egyptian food discovery and ordering platform, has secured US$10 million in a new funding round from MENA- and North America-based investors. With its new strategy to take minority stakes in fast-growing, Egyptian technology businesses, Fawry Group, a digital transformation and e-payment platform, is the lead investor in this round raised by Elmenus. Other investors include Marakez, an Egyptian real estate developer, and New York-based hedge fund Luxor Capital Group, for whom this is the first investment in the MENA region.

Having attracted more than 1.5 million monthly users since launching in 2018, Elmenus aims to personalize food recommendations at a dish level. Previously, the startup raised $1.5 million in a Series A round, and $8 million in a Series B round.

Amir Allam, CEO of Elmenus, says that his team’s successful closure of its previous funding rounds demonstrates the investors’ strong belief in the startup’s position in the Egyptian market. “More than ever, investors want sustainable startups,” Allam says. “You must show how important you consider profitability to be. You must not be perceived as a cash burning startup, pursuing growth at all costs.”

By the end of 2021, elmenus expects to empower 12,000 restaurants across 20 Egyptian cities with new data and tool offerings to help them scale their businesses. Its digital solutions are also expected to drive its existing database of several million users to switch to online ordering.

According to Allam, as the MENA region catches up with the pace of innovation in more developed markets, it also offers an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to reimagine long-standing industries. “We are able to create solutions and products that are better suited to local markets, because more global companies can’t easily adapt to that,” he notes. “We have seen this happen in our own industry in Egypt, and I believe it really is an advantage. Therefore, we can see a version of our future by looking at more developed markets, but we need to digest this and make educated decisions in order to draw a different path that works best for us here.”

When it comes to securing funds, Allam advises MENA entrepreneurs not to limit themselves to only investors present in the region. “Look for investors who will support you strategically and open up new networks,” he says. “The region might be short on founders who have ‘been there and done that,’ and taken their startups to huge exits. However, Elmenus has been fortunate to get individuals on board who are more hands-on and looking to grow their experience with founders/startups in markets such as ours. So, keep your eyes open for industry leaders, who can provide different kinds of support and insight.”

And this remains the theme of his response when asked to share his advice for entrepreneurs in the region. “Always stay true to your initial motives and trust your instinct,” Allam says. “Approach everything with a curious mindset and a learning opportunity, and enjoy the ride. Those are simple tips, but so many people get trapped in dogma, especially as they grow.”

“‘We Got Funded!’

Egypt-based Elmenus raises US$10 million in a pre-Series C round

The startup’s food ordering business has grown over 400% year-over-year compared to 2020 and has also achieved gross profitability.
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