

SE Taste
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COVER STORY Family and business are the best accompaniments for these clans, who are shaping the way Brisbane residents, eat, drink and be merry, writes Sharnee Rawson In two short years, a lawyer-turned-hotelier has emerged as the city's biggest restaurant player. Damian Griffiths has pulled off what everyone said was impossible – transforming a dingy, rarely visited corner of Fortitude Valley into a pumping hub of bars and restaurants, including the multifaceted Alfred & Constance.

The former immigration lawyer said he stumbled into the **hotel** industry, purchasing the budget Snooze Inn and a rundown building in Auchenflower, before tuning in to the “lack of fun, hip boutique hotels” and constructing Limes in 2008.

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“I basically bought the cheapest, smallest piece of land for **sale** in the Valley and convinced an aunt to invest by telling her we were building apartments,” Mr Griffiths said.

“The architects told me it was too small – it will never work – and Queensland's largest **property** developer told me I'd go broke. Everyone said I couldn't do it.” Mr Griffiths said the final **hotel** was the result of collaborative thinking. “A town planner suggested putting a rooftop bar on there, so I flew to Barcelona to see what was going on there,” he said.

“I was reading an article about the top 10 young designers in Australia, and one of them was Alexander Lotersztain, so I contacted him. That was a real turning point for us – he was around 23, and at the perfect point in his career, and he got me really interested in good design.” The partnership has been ongoing, with Mr Lotersztain lending his hand to the creative genius that is Alfred & Constance, with a restaurant, cocktail bar, dessert cafe and bunker bar weaved through two old Queenslander homes, plus sister restaurants Alfredo's, Kwan Brothers and Chester Street Bakery and Bar.

Plenty of time is devoted to researching global trends – Mr Griffiths has a Sydney newsagent send “every newspaper under the sun”, including the New York Times, via express post each week – as well as travelling and carefully cultivating relationships with equally passionate people.

“For A & C, I travelled to the United States to look at tiki bars and convinced (tiki cocktail legend) Richard Boccatto to come back and help me. We originally planned Kwan to be a ramen bar, but I stopped in **Hong Kong** via Italy and found a pumping restaurant that does Thai and Vietnamese street food, so a week later, I had Jocelyn Hancock and another one of our chefs on a plane to check it out.” The noodle machine, already **purchased** for the venue, sits untouched. “I like high-**energy** venues and I like the music loud. There's a fun side to the street-style of food.” Now he employs 180 people, with no signs of slowing down. Mr Griffiths said he learnt from the start about how important it was to build a good team.

“I've been fortunate to meet people on the way, often chance meetings or people I've sought out, to ask for their help and have been surprised.” he said.

He was in talks with patron chef and Queensland Taste contributor chef Jocelyn Hancock for 18 months before Alfred & Constance even opened.

"Some people will like me or hate me, and plenty think, this guy changes his mind a lot, but the good thing about Jocelyn and Alex is that they are very adaptable," he said. "I have the vision, these guys can implement it. They make it happen and bring edge to it." The results of the risks taken by Mr Griffiths (A & C was built mid-GFC) speak for themselves – the whole precinct is packed on weekends.

"Limes was the catalyst for all of it – a boutique **hotel** in the worst part of town can make it the coolest part of town," he said.

"I saw it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We've claimed it as our own A & C precinct, and now more bars have moved there. We don't see it as competition, but it adds more choice and brings more choice." Nehme Ghanem had a different foray into the hospitality industry – washing dishes with his brother Adonis at his family's now-defunct Brisbane restaurants, including Chez Laila (South Bank) and Adonis (Annerley).

Now the brothers have a solid portfolio of their own – Byblos (Hamilton and Melbourne), Baba Ganouj (city), Fifth Element (South Bank) and Black Bird (city). "We grew up in hospitality," Nehme said. "Our school years were spent earning pocket money washing dishes. My brother and I both went to university – I studied business, majoring in electronic commerce, and he did construction management – but we decided to do what we know is best." Time spent studying only strengthened their game. Nehme focuses on **operations**, working with staff and day-to-day issues, while Adonis manages the construction and upkeep of each venue.

"He's a real tradie, so he is a bit shorter with people, which is great for building venues because it gets the job done," Nehme Ghanem said.

"When it comes to staff, you have to be a bit more lenient. We employ over 200 people – sometimes it feels like I'm running a child care centre (laughs), you've got to stroke their egos and keep them happy." The duo never planned to expand their Brisbane empire to Melbourne, but when they were approached by a leasing agent, they saw the potential.

"We thought, if we can make it in Melbourne, we can show that we are a success and be taken seriously," Mr Ghanem said.

"That's exactly what it did – it opened our eyes to the world of hospitality outside of Brisbane, it built us a successful network and got us Jake." That would be Jake Nicolson, former head chef of Melbourne's Circa, The Prince, and a key player in the instant success of glitzy, glamorous Black Bird, which opened in February. Any space larger than 400sq metres is generally considered large in restaurant terms. Black Bird checks in at 1000sq **m**. Despite that, and spending \$3 **million** on the fitout of the Eagle Street Pier restaurant alone, Mr Ghanem said they still didn't consider it their riskiest move so far.

"We had so much confidence coming into this place. We knew Fridays (next door) was such a massive success with the drinking crowd, so we knew that if the restaurant didn't succeed, we could manage with the bar, so risk was minimised," he said.

"There were a few other factors as well – the location is first-class, on the riverside, there is a very good corporate market there, and we put together an A-team, with Penny Grant, from Melbourne's Stokehouse as sommelier, and Jake, so we had something special to differentiate ourselves." The brothers work well together as a team and occasionally defer to their well-seasoned parents for advice.

"Our dad is there for moral support and to mentor us," Mr Ghanem said. The Moubarak family also look to their Lebanese heritage for inspiration when designing menus and crafting a feel to their venues, including bars Lychee Lounge, Laruche and Gerard's Bar, and restaurants Gerard's Bistro, Hatch & Co, and the Mero (with the Apo, Fortitude Valley, on the way).

Johnny Moubarak said he, along with brothers Elie and Mel and sister Katie, grew up in the family's small deli and fruit shops, first in Melbourne and then Brisbane "Mum is a great cook and a great inspiration. People come into our home, and she welcomes with them open arms – that's how we want to operate our businesses," Mr Moubarak said.

The siblings were all travelling down their own paths – the oldest Elie as a civil engineer, second-eldest Mel and the youngest Katie with a trendy shoe business, and third child Johnny working as a film director, mainly in advertising and music videos.

"Elie really set things on track when he **purchased** the Lychee Lounge (West End). I started helping out and then when Laruche came on, we all jumped on deck," Mr Moubarak said.

He described two-storey Laruche , on Ann St, Fortitude Valley, as the biggest financial risk they had taken when it opened in 2008.

“We never wanted to come to the Valley, but it was such a great **site** and a beautiful building, we just had to take it,” he said.

“It was risky, especially because other venues like Cloudland were opening at the time, so we thought, is there enough room for another player? Obviously there was.” Gerard’s Bistro, the **group**’s first serious foray into food, opened in 2012, but didn’t open to the same level of immediate success.

“We struggled in the beginning – we had this formula that didn’t work, but we did a bit of research and realised it wasn’t about the food, it was about how the customer thinks,” Mr Moubarak said.

“We reset ourselves, how the food was plated and how the menu was formatted and it just clicked.” Changes included ditching the entree/main/dessert format for share plates, and scaling back servings sizes and prices.

“We don’t build venues to make them feel like your home – we want to take people out of their comfort zone, to inspire them and give them a different experience,” Mr Moubarak said. “That’s the key to our philosophy.” Like the Ghanems, the Moubaraks also have their own hats – Elie is the creative director, Mel acts as chief financial officer, Katie handles marketing and Johnny takes care of **operations**. “We have 120 staff but ... we describe ourselves as one big family – it’s all organic, we just bounce off each other,” he said.

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