



## Restaurateurs dish out

Hospitality News Middle East in collaboration with hodema consulting services gathered F&B entrepreneurs and moguls who spoke with no reservations

Restaurateurs always seem to have a lot on their plate, in more ways than one. A restaurateur is believed to run one of the most glamorous and lucrative businesses since sliced bread.

But, that is a skimmed version of the truth, say the owners of some of the most reputed names in the restaurant sector gathered by Hospitality News Middle East at Le Gray Hotel Beirut to share the full story. CEO of Hodema, Naji Markos and our editor, Leena Saidi, grilled them about what's hot and what's not.

### Trends: A must taste or a waste?

At a time when being in vogue has transcended the fashion industry and spilled over to the hospitality sector, we raise the question: Does creating a trendy food and beverage concept guarantee a winning business?

Not really, argues business magnate **Johnny Farah**.

"There are always trends popping up, not only in the context of concepts, but also cuisine. I think trendy things don't last," says the owner of the popular Asian-style restaurant **Casablanca**.



**Samer Maroun**, owner, **Olivo restaurant**, agrees. "Trends go up quickly and go down quickly. A good concept, not a trend, is what lasts," he explains.

**Fawzi Ghantous**, general manager, Skateboard, whose portfolio includes **DT** and **The Gathering**, agrees. "What's usually trendy in Beirut is the place, not the concept. It may be trendy for a certain time regardless of the food it serves, its design, or concept. So, most people open a place, make money, and then sell out the restaurant," he says.



His peer, **Ziad Kamel**, explains how that is possible and clarifies what a trend essentially is. "Fads are short-lived ideas that never make it to the mainstream and trends have a medium lifespan," says the founder and CEO of The Alleyway Group that includes **Amarres** and **Couqley Bistro**.

"Sometimes trends cease to become trends and become something else, like the all American diner, which started out as a fad, became a trend, later cementing itself as a concept. A successful trend that is backed up with strong management and operation may become a concept and part of life," adds Kamel, who doubles as the treasurer of the Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes, Nightclubs, and Pastries in Lebanon.



Young restaurateur **Joey Ghazal** stresses that the time factor is essential for trends in the F&B sector. "You might have something that is very trendy and will work for a year or two, but ultimately people will get bored, so something else will come along, which will attract their interest," says the CEO and founder of concept development and restaurant management company Les Enfants Terribles, which includes **St. Elmo's** and **Cro Magnon Steakhouse** among its portfolio. Concurring that "people are very taken by trends", Ghazal points out that "the lifespan of trends is short if they don't become classics [...] I think a trend can become permanent and part of a culture."



**Samer Chehlaoui**, CEO of **Roadster diner**, chimes in. "Roadster is a very classical concept... We took the concept of your basic American diner and we refined it to the Lebanese taste, adding to our menu things that normally classical American diners don't sell." Chehlaoui is quick to





add that the problem in Beirut is comparing it to metropolises like London or Paris. "But we don't have volume. Some five to seven percent of the population goes out and you need to give them a choice."

"Clients demand certain things," continues Farah. "Ten years ago, droves of pizzerias were opening, and only the good ones stood the test of time. Today, clients push you to open burger places for instance, hence the mushrooming of burger joints in Lebanon."

### What do people want?

So, it is not a question of restaurateurs "imposing" trends on customers but more about offering what people want. And, people, according to the seasoned restaurateurs, like classic offerings. "I'm not sure how much Lebanese people follow trends. They always seek quality food and service... People are now into classic restaurants with quality food, particularly in the aftermath of the food safety scandals," remarks **Tony El Ramy**, managing partner, **Al Sultan Brahim Restaurants Group**. "Customers are back in the lap of big names to be sure about the source and quality of what they're eating."



Evidently, many trendy restaurants have opened in Lebanon with topnotch chefs and several million dollar investments but they didn't work," adds El Ramy, who is also the general secretary of the Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes, Nightclubs, and Pastries in Lebanon. Farah nods in agreement. "I think the trend now is to go back to the basics. Restaurateurs are

capitalizing on good quality." Even a trendy restaurant ought to serve classic items that people are familiar with, says Kamel. "For example, Couqley is a French bistro, where we offer all kinds of French cuisine. Our bestsellers are the classic steak frites and filet de boeuf. People usually go for what they are comfortable with," he notes.

### Beirut as the showcase for F&B trends in the region

Given customers' overindulgence in classics and interest in certain concepts over others, does this mean that Beirut has fallen short of being the gastronomy capital of the Middle East? Opinions from the restaurateurs were divided. **Ziad Mouawad**, owner, **Burgundy Wine Bar** restaurant thinks that with high-end restaurants, Lebanon is still in the lead but with middle to high restaurants, it is not, "because customers are not very open to trying new things and tastes, they always ask for the same things... We need to march forward to become the pioneers again."



El Ramy staunchly disagrees. "Despite all the challenges, Lebanese restaurateurs are exporting concepts far more than importing them; we are acting as franchisors more than franchisees. Restaurateurs in Lebanon have become a school of hospitality." For Ghazal, reality falls somewhere in between. "I think the Lebanese still have the best ideas and the best flair in the Middle East... But I think that it has become very difficult to create concepts that can be showcased," he says.



According to Farah, Lebanon is unmistakably the gastronomic trendsetter in the region. "Lebanon is known for exporting several solid homegrown concepts instead of copying from abroad." **Naji Morkos**, CEO, **hodema consulting services**, backs this with numbers. "According to our calculations, 50 made in Lebanon F&B brands have been exported internationally."

### Key to success

So, what is integral to the success of restaurants in Lebanon? Consistency is a key term. "People want to know what they are going to get and how much they are going to pay for it. So, consistency is a key in any kind of business, not just hospitality," states Chehlaoui. A creative brand image is also elemental. **Casper and Gambini's** is a case in point and **Anthony Maalouf**, CEO, Ant Ventures Holding, explains: "We decided to create a certain brand name that will spur people's interest and we created a marketing story and we carried on this tradition."



### Restaurateur vs. business person

Despite its many assets, Beirut's restaurant sector is also suffering the forced entry of businessmen, the restaurateurs lament.



**Gordon Campbell Gray**, chairman and founder, Campbell Gray Hotels, and founder of **Indigo on the Roof** and **Gordon's Cafe**, comments: "I think the main problem here is that most people view this as a business as opposed to being a passion. Businessmen see this as a business opportunity and they

don't love what they're doing. When they see this [just] as an investment, the result is [that] they come and go."

### Food safety disgraces: a blessing in disguise?

The restaurateurs did not deem the recent food quality scandals as part of the challenges thwarting their businesses. "I think most of us were happy about what happened because it provided people with assurance that when they go to well-known restaurants, they will be served quality food," Maalouf says. Campbell Gray attests to the aforementioned.



We saw a drop in meat sales for about a week. It was a very short-lived effect." Yet, the food safety concerns made restaurateurs ever more vigilant with suppliers as well as monitor quality even further in their restaurants. "We go for trusted suppliers," El Ramy says. **Sophie Schoucair**, owner, **Marinella Trattoria** restaurant stresses the importance of being choosy with suppliers. "As someone opening a new business, I ask friends for the good suppliers. And, I try several suppliers and pick the ones that provide the best quality." Ghazal says keeping a healthy competition between suppliers is a wise move. "I think it is important to have two or three suppliers because sometimes they get lazy and they don't give you the quality you were aiming for."

### Is social media the future?

And, lastly, where do the restaurateurs stand on social media? "Online booking and mobile reservation is the future. I think social media is extremely important to engage with your customer base," Kamel says. "We want to increase our customer care and technology is the only way to do that," Ghazal adds. But, social media may not be as efficient across the board. "I think social media is more effective with the younger clients," comments Maalouf. It also varies with the type of restaurant, El Ramy goes on to say. "Online booking might not work with Lebanese restaurants."