

Flip the script

With the successes of *Miss Lily's* and now *Indochine* already under their belt, a Dubai-raised duo continues to shake up the city's restaurant scene by playing in the margins

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FEATURE



MISS LILY'S ISN'T FOR EVERYONE. It is dark, windowless, and the ceilings are low. There are only 30 seats and the tables are huddled so close together that you are practically in conversation with those sitting next to you. The music is banging, the temperature is warm and the Jamaican cuisine has a kick like a mule. Unlike most other restaurants in the UAE, it doesn't try to be everything to everyone. If you get the vibe, then you're in. If you don't, well, you won't be missed.

The tried and tested method in Dubai hospitality has long been 'the bigger it is, the better it is.' In a town not best-known for its subtlety, the largest rock always makes the biggest splash. Except when, very occasionally, it doesn't.

The timing, trajectory and precision of throwing a rock are all elements that can affect the impact that it makes on the water's surface. Get them wrong and a large boulder can slip under the surface without a trace, but get them right and a pebble can not only make a splash, but the subsequent ripples will ensure its impact has a lasting effect.

For best friends and business partners Varun Khemaney and Khalil 'KD' Dahmash the pebble was a small Jamaican restaurant in Downtown, New York City. Amid the massive quarry of named restaurants, food trucks and complicated concept pop-ups that make up the metropolis' food scene, Miss Lily's is not really interested in drop-ins and, honestly, would prefer that they looked elsewhere. Khemaney and Dahmash got the vibe. And they wanted more.

"When you go travelling, often the places you remember the most are those little, off-beat, secret spots that you just happen to come across," says Khemaney. "You know the ones. Those cool, intimate spots that you want to take someone to in order to impress them. Well, that was Miss Lily's. Dubai didn't have that kind of thing and 'KD' and I knew we were the ones who could change that." Fastforward five years and has Miss Lily's quickly become one of the coolest restaurants in the city, with the difficulty of getting a booking making it even more covetable for a clientele used to getting whatever they want.

Born and raised in Dubai, Khemaney and Dahmash were in their twenties when they both reached a bit of a crossroads.

Dahmash had reluctantly followed his father's footsteps into the world of financial consultancy, but was already seeking a life that appealed to his more social and creative nature. While on the other side of the Atlantic, Khemaney had recently graduated from Boston College and was rebounding from his first dabble in the restaurant business, opening the ill-fated New York restaurant Tribeca Canvas with Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto.

"I knew I had to do something different," says Dahmash. "I was actually going to open up my own

"The Dubai clientele is used to getting whatever it wants...making it difficult to get a booking at Miss Lily's only makes it more covetable"



fashion concept store, but after talking it through with Varun and the fact that we both vibed over Miss Lily's, I knew that this was exactly the thing I wanted to be a part of."

With Khemaney already having an 'in' to the New York restaurant scene, his networking had led him into conversation with Serge Becker, a famed nightlife impresario who had developed The Box (a nightclub that had mixed bottle service with burlesque), La Esquina (a taco shop with a hidden speakeasy), and the achingly cool Miss Lily's. "It was November 2015, and I basically ask him what I had to do to let me take his idea to Dubai," explains Khemaney. "The process took like six months of convincing, and at times we went months without hearing anything!" It turned out Becker happened to be entertaining offers from two major hospitality companies to take Miss Lily's to Dubai. "We were like, 'What?! How do these guys even know about this place?!'" laughs Dahmash.

For Dahmash and Khemaney, this time, fortune favoured the brave. The two plucky newcomers quickly set up their company VKD Hospitality, of which Becker now helps operate as a business partner, creative director and a mentor.

"Serge eventually told us that he was playing hard to get," explains Khemaney. "He said that we seemed like good guys, but he was hearing the same things from three people about a city that he had never been to. What eventually convinced him was that he believed we understood the vibe the best. The other two pitches wanted to go big, whereas we wanted to go small."

DIFC CONTINUES TO REIGN SUPREME as Dubai's high-end dining district. Stalwarts like Zuma, La Petite Maison and Roberto's hold steady over the waves, while other big name contenders like Marco Pierre White have cast and capsized vessels with the



Tucked away in Dubai's Sheraton Grand Hotel, the offensively bright Miss Lily's has become one of the city's coolest nightspots

coming of the tides. For VKD Hospitality to break the glass ceiling, a larger stone was needed.

"We always said to ourselves, Lily's was great but our second restaurant will prove that we are good at what we do, and not just one hit wonders," says Dahmash.

With their market instincts proving correct in their first foray, they understood early on that the success of a niche, off-beat, urban

community-endorsed restaurant would not be enough to crack the upmarket clientele in and around the city's financial district. They needed a big name. They brought Indochine.

Synonymous with celebrity, glamour and unrivaled hospitality, the New York City original has been serving its elevated Vietnamese-French food to the Mick Jagers, Andy Warhols and Tom Fords of the world for more than 35 years, shielding their

shenanigans and rules-dont-apply-to-me celebrity ways under its iconic tropical-print wallpaper.

While a world away from their first venture, VKD went about the Indochine process with the same approach—by identifying what was missing in the market. "There are some beautiful high-end restaurants in DIFC, but what was missing was that sophisticated cool," says Khemaney. "There was nowhere that had the white tablecloth *and* the downtown New York cool factor. A place where you can wear a cool pair of kicks and not feel out of place. We wanted somewhere that the growing creative and fashion community could have an upmarket offering and not feel like they were being judged." And since it opened in November 2019, people have indeed come—including the likes of Roger Federer, Fernando Alonso, Chiara Ferragni and supermodel Shanina Shaik.

For Dahmash and Khemaney the argument of establishing a homegrown restaurant concept versus an imported one is moot. While they mention that down the line they would certainly love to open their own concept and eventually have enough success to export it to a place like New York, where so much of their inspiration obviously comes from. But, right now, that is not important. "We asked ourselves,



According to Dahmash and Khemaney Indochine adds a sophisticated cool that DIFC was missing





if we didn't believe a brand exists that would honestly fill the niche we've identified, then we will create one. Fortunately, we found Indochine."

With a broader understanding of restaurant operations, and the tutelage of Serge Becker alongside them, the stakes were ramped up. Not only was the original Indochine an important piece in New York's dining scene puzzle, it had never been licensed internationally before, nor had its design aesthetic changed much in 30 years. To give it a 21st century update, Becker sought out interior designers Studio Robert McKinley in order to bring the restaurant's original cues—the neon red entry sign, the palm print wallpaper, the red lacquered shutters and deep-aubergine banquets—up-to-date and relevant for Dubai's nightlife scene.

"With both places, they are not exactly the same as they are in NYC. They cannot be if they want to succeed," says Dahmash. "What we have done in Dubai is update them to fit into a younger, newer city where the clientele is slightly different, but still seeks the same thing." It is differences like this why both Dahmash and Khemaney don't particularly like using the word 'franchise.' They see the projects as licensing with creative license. "Taking on a brand with a history behind it like Indochine is an honour. It's like, holy sh*t, we've got big shoes to fill!" says Khemaney. "Both Miss Lily's and Indochine have never expanded before. What made them think that we were the right guys to do it was not just that we were young and ambitious, but we stressed the importance of our desire to create on top of what is already there."

Dahmash speaks about the success of Miss Lily's and Indochine as being a validation for him leaving his previous career. "Even my dad, who couldn't understand why I wanted to leave a good job in finance to open a Jamaican restaurant, came along to our original pop-up at SoleDXB and was, like, okay... I get it." The truth is, the hospitality business is a particularly brutal one. Especially in a city like Dubai where enormous operating costs on all fronts crank up prices and narrow the odds of success for even well-established companies. And, of course, a global pandemic didn't help.

Across the world the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus shut down airports, locked down communities and decimated industries that relied on human's nature to be social. Tourism, spending and confidence in going out took a massive hit, and even the most established of hospitality businesses were sent spiralling. There is no mistaking that VKD Hospitality was equally impacted, however, one of the things that Khemaney and Dahmash say they are most proud of is that they did not have to let any member of staff go during the long, dark summer.

"When things are good in business, you don't mind occasionally turning the blind eye to

"We preach 'family' to our staff. And if you don't do everything you can to protect your family, well that goes against our ethics. I believe in karma"

There's no shortage of flavour at Miss Lily's



overspending on certain things," says Khemaney. "Now, because of the pandemic, you have to be very careful. What it taught us was how to run a business with your costs tightened to a bare minimum. Running the business just to be able to survive."

For Dahmash—who Khemaney joking refers to as 'Pits and Peaks' due to him being the more emotional half of the duo—things during the summer were particularly tough, with them having to renegotiate every single expense and contract, from the lease on the venue to every supplier and staff member contract. "I was sitting at home in July with my head in my hands!" recalls Dahmash. "But if I look at it in a glass half-full scenario, I can say thank god this challenge came when we had two restaurants instead of 10. Or that it happened when we had 150 staff and not 1,500. It's true what they say: the bigger you are, the harder you fall." While VKD had big plans going into 2020—which may have included whispers of another new concept starting to take root—global health concerns very much relegated those plans to the back burners with the sole goal of the year being survival. "We preach 'family' to our staff," says Khemaney, "and to not do everything to help your 'family' well, that goes against our ethics not just as a company but as people. I believe in karma."

It's a refreshingly selfless stance to have taken within the recent troubled times. In just a few short years, the boys behind VKD Hospitality have ridden the biggest of waves, navigated through one of the industry's toughest storms, and unquestionably come out wiser and more determined to leave a lasting positive impact on the city that raised them. It might yet take a few more stones, but all the evidence points to Varun and 'KD' knowing just how to throw them. **©**