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Turning Dreams into Reality

Yossi Eliyadoo, founder and co-owner of The Entourage Group, sheds light on the creative process underpinning trailblazing restaurant brands Izakaya, The Butcher and The Duchess.

Words: Abigail Lowe • Photography: Courtesy of The Entourage Group (unless otherwise stated)

It's a blazing hot day in Ibiza. Naysayers may scoff at such a superfluous statement but this chunk of Balearic rock has been uncharacteristically plagued by heavy clouds of late, so blue skies and sunshine are a welcome respite. I'm sat on the outdoor terrace of Izakaya – which opened in the grounds of Ibiza's most cosmopolitan hotel, Sir Joan, in 2017 – waiting for Yossi Eliyadoo, founder of The Entourage Group and brains behind the Asian-inspired restaurant. When he arrives, he's clad in a baseball cap and sunglasses, totally at ease with the island's soaring temperatures – unsurprising given that he spent last summer here overseeing the venue's opening.

“Last summer in Ibiza is very blurry for me,” he admits once he's sunk into a seat, a faint Israeli lilt detectable in his tone. It's comforting to know that even a man as composed as Eliyadoo can't escape the infamously epicurean clutches of the White Isle but, nevertheless, you sense he's seldom flustered; it takes more than a muggy day to ruffle his feathers.

Born and raised in Tel Aviv, Eliyadoo grew up in a house that he describes as a hive of activity. Even as a wide-eyed kid, he recalls that “there were always lots of pots of food cooking”, and although he says his family didn't play a direct role in the forging of his hospitality career, perhaps this is what sowed the initial seeds. Because by the age of 13, he was already balancing school life with working in a restaurant, and once he stepped foot over that high-energy threshold, he never looked back. “It was very natural for me to get a job in restaurants as a teenager,” he muses. “I'm a sociable person so I was excited to go and meet older people and to learn from them. I worked five nights a week when I was at school.” By the tender age of 16, he was already running his first kitchen. “I liked the buzz; I liked the action,” he laughs. “Eventually it just took over my life.”

Eliyadoo went on to found what is widely considered to be one of the most successful high-end hospitality companies in Europe. Along the way, he has racked up a string of achievements including opening a handful of





Izakaya Ibiza



The Butcher Nine Streets in Amsterdam

restaurants in Tel Aviv and launching concept restaurant Chino Latino across several cities in the UK, but arguably it's with The Entourage Group that he's really secured a reputation for unrivalled chutzpah when it comes to taking calculated risks. Then again, when you've worked your way up every rung of the ladder, perhaps it's less a case of gambling and more a about spotting opportunities. "In any business, you need to know everything," he explains. "By learning every aspect of what I do, it gives me more tools to succeed. I've been there and done it myself so I know exactly what I'm asking my team and I know what to expect."

There's very little margin for error – Eliyadoo expects as close to perfection as possible, both from himself and others. It's an unrelenting attitude that becomes more understandable when you consider that The Entourage Group now has multiple projects and venues across five cities to shelter beneath its sprawling umbrella.

"Why would we build a wall in front of the kitchen where all these beautiful, skilled people are working? It makes no sense."

The Entourage Group comprises six distinct brands: Momo, the group's trailblazing Asian restaurant; Izakaya, an Asian-fusion specialist; The Butcher, a high-end burger bar; The Duchess, a Michelin-starred fine-dining destination; Mr Porter, a swankier take on a traditional steakhouse; and Mad Fox, an underground New York-inspired club space. Each originated in Amsterdam, though some have since been wheeled out across Europe, and all are credited with instigating a dramatic shift in the Dutch capital's dining scene. Momo, housed within the refurbished Park Hotel, was the group's inaugural outing. "That restaurant really changed Amsterdam," Eliyadoo contemplates thoughtfully. "People didn't know how to take it, but it was still successful from day one. Within a year we were working on the next projects – we developed many things in parallel."

What made Momo such a shock to the already sophisticated Dutch system? Probably Eliyadoo's bold, brazen approach to dining. Gone were stuffy rooms, closed kitchens

and stagnant bars, and in their place came stripped-back spaces, exposed kitchens and 360-degree bars designed specifically to encourage maximum social interaction. "The 360-degree bar is in our DNA," he explains. "We want everything to be open – see and be seen. It's sexier and much more fun that way." And he's right, of course, such an instinctive approach to socialising has its merits – it's far easier to strike up a conversation with a stranger when you're not faced with a wall of bottles. Consequently, the 360-degree bar is a feature of many of The Entourage Group's locations, each serving as the focal point around which the real action swirls.

This isn't the only groundbreaking feature; Eliyadoo has stringent rules when it comes to design, and he's militant in ensuring that every aspect of his vision is brought assiduously to life. "We expose everything if we can," he says. "Why would we build a wall in front of the kitchen where all these beautiful, skilled people

are working? It makes no sense. And let's put people in the same room together, that stops everyone wondering what's going on in the next room."

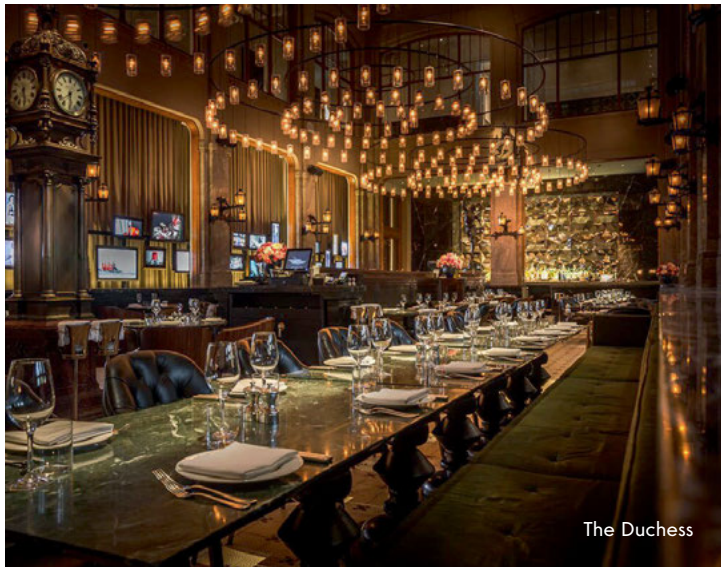
These tried-and-tested concepts may not sound particularly revolutionary now – we've all experienced the hustle they create when in full flow – but a decade ago they shook up a stagnant Amsterdam landscape, and since then have become the benchmark for others to follow. It's proof of the merits of Eliyadoo's calculated risks. "When you go out it should be to dress up, to eat food you don't cook at home, and to hear music you don't have at home," he declares matter of factly. "These days you can order pretty much anything to your sofa, but if you're going on a night out you put the effort in. We want people to walk out with a good feeling, and that way we make sure they've plenty of reasons to come back."

And people do keep coming back, time and time again. In the decade since Momo launched at Park Hotel, branches of Izakaya have opened in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Ibiza

and Munich, outlets of The Butcher have followed in Amsterdam, Berlin and Ibiza, and the launches of The Duchess and Mr Porter (both within W Amsterdam) and Mad Fox have been wildly successful. Eliyadoo put weight behind a clearly defined formula, trusted his instincts and ran with it – for him, there was never any room for doubt. Nevertheless, many visionaries benefit from being able to bounce ideas off those with complementary skillsets; for Eliyadoo, this important role falls to business partner Liran Wizman who – besides heading up the Europe Hotels Private Collection and having a range of stylish hotels to his name such as W Amsterdam, Park Hotel and the Sir Hotels brand – also sourced the all-important locations for their flourishing partnership. "Liran comes to me with an idea as a restaurateur and his partner, and I decide if it's something we can make work together," he explains. "We've worked together for a long time – if I don't see it, he doesn't question it. He's very good at what he does, and I have the same vision with restaurants."

Indeed, delve beneath Eliyadoo's cool exterior and it's as though all the characters he's conjured up as the face of The Entourage Group brands have been running about his head for years, ready to pop onto the page fully formed. "Most of the time, I sit with a piece of blank paper in front of me," he explains. "And then I start to describe who and what the concept is. So with Momo, for example, I knew I wanted it to be an Asian restaurant but I wanted it to be different, more fresh. So I came up with Momo, which comes from Momoko, a Japanese ladies' name that means blossom or peach. I used the name as a starting point and its meaning is reflected in both the restaurant's elegant design and the menu." He follows this process for each new culinary adventure, emphatic that having an established character in mind plays a pivotal role in the design process, which in turn affects every element of the experience. "A lot of people design places without thinking about the concept," he says. "People don't realise that every little detail matters."

But Eliyadoo does, and so he chuckles when I ask if he'd ever consider a project in which the space had already been designed. "No, no, no, absolutely not," he says with a definitive shake of the head. "How are you going to



The Duchess



Izakaya Munich

design the kitchen if you don't know what you're going to cook? You need to know the menu before you build the kitchen. Then you have to think about the tables, the glassware, the cutlery. Everything goes hand in hand, everything has a reason." There's no doubt that this certainty of spirit comes from experience, but there seems more to it than that. Elyahoo's assuredness appears intricately woven into his being – he exudes a remarkable level of perceptiveness not bestowed on most other restaurateurs. "People think a bar is a bar, a chair is a chair, a kitchen is a kitchen – it's not," he continues. "I'm 45 now and I've been working in the industry since I was 13, I've learnt a lot in that time."

You needn't look far to find the fruits of this experience – it's visible in the minutiae of each of his restaurants, and in the brands themselves as a whole. Big characters they may be, but each is wonderfully diverse and very much sings to its own tune. "Look at all our brands and none of them are alike," he emphasises. "They have their own identity. Nothing on the menu is the same, the plates aren't the same, the wine list is different. I don't want people to have the same experience if they go to all of our properties. Absolutely everything should be distinctive." You need only compare the sumptuous decadence of The Duchess with the tongue-in-cheek brazenness of The Butcher for evidence that each of his carefully created characters do in fact offer very different experiences for diners.

So with multiple brands already alive and kicking, and their future prosperity looking as assured as their spirited personalities, what's next for The Entourage Group? "I learnt in life never to look too far ahead, so I take things step by step," he says, before reeling off a list of plans that most people would need a lifetime to complete. "I'm working on Barcelona with Liran, which will open next year. And then Milan," he explains. "We've worked out the layout and that's the most crucial step, but it was already a great opportunity, venue and location." We'll be seeing far more of The Butcher too. "We plan to have 80 sites of The Butcher in the next five years," he says earnestly. "This is one of our brands that we can easily duplicate without compromising on quality." And there's another character in the works as well, this time of Italian heritage. "We've got a pizza concept called Tony Loco launching in Amsterdam in a few months' time," he smiles. "Huge 50cm-long pizzas with big, thin slices."

Whatever Elyahoo decides to throw his energies into next, one thing's for certain – he'll keep plotting his own path, refusing to kowtow to the pressures of passing trends. "I'm happy to invest in chic, modern places, but trends come and go," he ponders. "I want to build things that have a strong base; things that stand the test of time and will still be relevant ten years from now." Judging by his track record so far, he looks well on course to do just that. ●

www.the-entouragegroup.com