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National Chef of the Year James Devine talks about tackling the competition head on



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This much I know

People

Eric Yu

As the Breakfast Group – operator of Bar Rumba, Substation Soho and Opium, to name a few – nears its 25th anniversary, its managing director tells *Katie Pathiaki* the secrets of his success

My background is very typically Chinese. My parents instilled in me that education is hugely important, so I went to university to do economics and accounting. I worked in various roles before my father said to me: "You're never going to make proper money working for someone else."

In 1991 I took over Villa Stefano in Holborn with my partner. Part of the lease included a huge basement, which was a restaurant with a dance floor. It was a success. That is what started us off.

A lot of people say to me that my degree was a waste of time. I think it has served me very well. It taught me how to be logical: the degree wasn't all about balance sheets and bank accounts but a four-year process of making me work out conundrums.

I find it really difficult being part of something I don't enjoy. That affects how the company is run. As a person, I've moved away from 6am nightclubs and have started to redesign my business.

The most important thing I have learned over the years is location. The one thing not to do is open something when you don't have pockets that are deep enough to support yourself for at least six months. All of my businesses have taken a number of months to get to where they need to be. There are good and bad challenges. The good challenges include deciding what to do with a space. Should it revolve around food, dancing or drinks? But there are other challenges you have to work at continually, such as wages and stock; those are the bits I find dull because I love being creative.

In the next 10 years I want to see that the youth are still given chances to do things in key places, such as Soho and Covent Garden. Young



"The next thing I would like to do is an outdoor restaurant that does only tasting menus"

entrepreneurs aren't buying sites in Soho because they can't afford to. If London is not careful, we will be inundated with chains.

The next thing I would like to do is an outdoor restaurant that does only tasting menus. My idea is to bring tasting menus to the masses. It's not dissimilar to the 68 and Boston wine bar in Soho, where every bottle of wine is £20. When you do that, people are able to totally relax and once they do it's easier to have a good time.

In my spare time I like to travel outside of the UK. It's great to spend time abroad. I always ask myself if there is anything out there that will help my business. In January I was out in Havana, Cuba, and when I got back, I said, let's do

CV

1991 – present Managing director of the Breakfast Group
2016 Opened Burlock and Over Easy, both in Mayfair, London
2015 Opened 68 and Boston, London
2014 Opened Gas Street Social, the Mailbox, Birmingham
2012 Opened Salvador and Amanda, Bloomsbury, and Opium in Gerrard Street, both in London
2009 Opened Maya, Dean Street, London
2007 Opened Grand Central, Shoreditch, London
2005 Opened Punk, London
2003 Opened Salvador and Amanda in Great Newport Street, London
2002 Opened Opium in Dean Street, London
2001 Opened the Social in Little Portland Street, Fitzrovia, London
1999 Opened Pop in Soho Street, London
1998 Opened Jerusalem in Fitzrovia, London
1995-1996 Opened Substation in Soho; Substation South in Brixton; and Saint Bar and Restaurant in Great Newport Street, all in London
1993 Opened Bar Rumba on Shaftesbury Avenue, London
1991 Opened Villa Stefano in Holborn, London

a rum bar! I don't know if it was conscious, but it definitely influenced my decision.

I have achieved my dream in terms of lifestyle. I can take time off whenever I want and it's a phenomenal job. Even when I've had a terrible day and wonder if I go back to being an accountant, the answer is always no.