

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

Four chefs who are shaking up the city's dining scene tell why it was important for them to step out of their mentor's – or patron's – kitchen and go it alone.

STORY **APPLE MANDY**

The past five years have seen more independently owned restaurants opening in Hong Kong. Yardbird, with Matt Abergel at the kitchen's helm, won rave reviews for its chicken yakitori and über-friendly service. Philippe Orrico's Upper Modern Bistro, Olivier Elzer's Seasons by Olivier E. and Frederic Chabbert's Mano opened subsequently, catering to those looking for something inexpensive but still definitely fine-dining, or sans the frills for some. These chefs, who either own or co-own their restaurants, first had to have the audacity to leave good jobs – and their mentors – determined to set up their own ventures. For their eager patrons, the result is a more casual approach to award-winning feasting.

“I DON'T THINK THE ACTUAL CONCEPT HAS A LOT TO DO WITH SUCCESS. IT'S THE TEAM, ENVIRONMENT AND CHEFS WHO MAKE PEOPLE COME BACK TO OUR RESTAURANT”

TOP RIGHT
Grilled chicken wings, seasoned with sea salt and shichimi.

COURTESY JASON MICHAEL LANG



MATT ABERGEL YARDBIRD

Half Canadian, half Moroccan-Israeli Matt Abergel shook up Hong Kong's dining scene when his 55-seat restaurant, Yardbird, opened in June 2011. The independently owned, neck-to-tail yakitori joint on Bridges Street in Central has created much buzz for its hearty food and affable service.

Abergel had the desire to open his own restaurant even before he started working for Zuma, a contemporary Japanese restaurant in Landmark. After two years as head chef, he decided it was time to venture out on his own and be his own boss.

“I had enough years working for other people, and I am not a compromising person,” says Abergel. “I am the kind of person that if I want something, I will get it. It's just a matter of timing.”

Yardbird's menu is short and simple. It features small and big plates, as well as rice dishes and soups. The focus is the different chicken parts, seasoned with salt or with other spices and grilled to perfection. The food is not the same as in fine-dining restaurants, but people are willing to queue for it, for hours.

“Chicken is every man's food and it's also a celebratory food,” says Abergel. “It's the food we really love to eat. Chicken is underrated and it's usually done poorly, that's why it isn't given enough attention.”

In choosing poultry, Abergel tested different kinds from France, Australia, Japan, and the United States. He found that those from the New Territories were the best by far, for fat content and freshness. So, wanting to highlight what this city has to offer, Abergel asked his suppliers to deliver 50 chickens each day to guarantee freshness.

“I have chefs like Jason Atherton admiring the chicken's quality,” says Abergel. “Nobody really used local produce when I first moved here in 2008. Some



people don't eat local ingredients since they are cheap. In reality, the price per kilo of chicken is more expensive than imported ones a lot of times.”

The food is a standout at Yardbird, but so is the service. The restaurant carries a ‘no service charge’ policy, encouraging guests to give tips at their own discretion. Together with his partner, Lindsay Jang, Abergel trained his staff to be knowledgeable, friendly and smart.

“A lot of my staff has been with me since day one,” says Abergel. “I take care of them – they have health insurance and have a high retention. The biggest challenge is people, and once you find good ones, you have to find an interest to make them happy and keep them challenged, because work will become a mundane thing.”

While high rents have caused some restaurants to shut their operations, Yardbird is still going from strength to strength. “I have a personal relationship with my landlord and I'm lucky to have him,” says Abergel. “Getting kicked out or doubling the rent is the ultimate fear for everybody.”

Today, Abergel has a twofold focus: attention to detail and a commitment to not compromise on anything, which he learned while working at Masa in New York, an *omakase* sushi restaurant launched by Masa Takayama. “I don't need to compromise to achieve this success,” says Abergel. “We're a little bit different as this is where our business thrives.”

“Staff is the most important thing. We could be running any type of restaurant or create any number of concepts and have the same results in a lot of ways. I don't think the actual concept has a lot to do with success. It's the team, environment and chefs who make people come back to our restaurant.”

FREDERIC CHABBERT MANO

Frederic Chabbert, a native of Toulouse in southwest France, built a successful 12-year career in hospitality management. He worked for Petrus in Island Shangri-La for eight years, and before that, for the Shangri-La hotel in Kuala Lumpur and The Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco. Working in fine-dining restaurants, Chabbert mastered the theory and techniques of classical French cooking.

He helped Petrus gain its second Michelin star in 2010, but the following year, the restaurant lost a star. On news of this loss, he felt bad. "But on the second day, my team and I discussed what we should do," Chabbert says. "Losing a star was a good thing to happen because it helped build my confidence back."

In July 2013, Chabbert left Petrus in search of greener pastures. He already knew the owner at Mano, a 4,000-square-foot restaurant at L Place in Sheung Wan. The owner was looking to improve the menu and, having the same vision as Chabbert, they pursued what he had always wanted – that is, to run a restaurant. In September 2013, Mano was reopened with Chabbert at the helm.

The food at Mano is not much different from Petrus. Chabbert uses the same techniques but says the dishes are "less stiff". He focuses on flavours and lets the produce speak for itself. Chabbert recreated the wine list, and instead of consigning them, he buys direct from his suppliers. Today, Mano's wine list offers almost 100 labels.

"Wines are an investment," Chabbert says. "It's not good for the business to rely mostly on consigning wines. We give lower margins because we want our guests to enjoy their wines and drink more."

Chabbert did not only do the menu planning, he also got involved in everything from staff training to designing the bar and choosing the paintings. He says that kind of all-round engagement would have been impossible when he was working at a hotel restaurant.

Leaving the hotel industry was a breath of fresh air for Chabbert. Budgets were tightly controlled and projects could take months to get approved. Once, when he was working on a project for two months, it was prolonged to six months because it needed various approvals from management. Chabbert says



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situations like that drained much of his energy.

Today, at Mano, Chabbert says he works 14- to 16-hour days but does not feel tired at all. He does not punch a time clock and says he is confident he makes his guests happy. "What I learned from working in the hospitality industry is following procedures," says Chabbert. "I also learned [about] acknowledging guests, keeping your kitchen clean at all times, dealing with figures, and keeping your staff happy."

Co-owning a restaurant has its own challenges. "Staff is definitely an issue," Chabbert says. "In Hong Kong, there are jobs everywhere. One day, you'll find your staff leave and a new one comes in. The staff is a best asset and we make sure to take care of them, train them and treat them like members of a family."

COURTESY MANO



TOP RIGHT
Seasonal greens
with truffles

OLIVIER ELZER SEASONS BY OLIVIER E.

Olivier Elzer is one chef with an impressive track record of helping restaurants gain a Michelin star. Arriving in Hong Kong five and a half years ago, he has been behind the success of some reputable French fine-dining restaurants like Pierre and L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon.

Elzer joined The Mandarin Oriental's Pierre restaurant in August 2009, taking over the position vacated by Philippe Orrico, now chef and director of Upper Modern Bistro. For Elzer as chef de cuisine, the challenge was to help Pierre gain its second Michelin star. He made that happen the very next year, bringing much satisfaction to Pierre Gagnaire, the management and his team.

Thirty-five-year-old Elzer – born in Germany and raised in Alsace – was also the man who helped L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon attain its third star, in 2012. Working there was never easy, he says, but he found the job “interesting”. During his three years as executive chef, his main responsibility was to oversee 30 chefs in an open kitchen, as well as look after the bakery, Le Salon de Thé Joël Robuchon, and pastry shop Le Café de Joël Robuchon.

“I love Pierre Gagnaire and Joël Robuchon,” says Elzer. “But working in their kitchens meant limiting yourself to their food and style. After confirming the star at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon in 2013, I thought my next step was either to work again at a fine-dining restaurant or have my own kitchen.”

Elzer chose to open his own restaurant. He already knew the people from Hysan Development, the listed company that owns Lee Gardens One and Two, Hysan Place, Lee Theatre and Leighton. As previous guests at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, they started talking business with him and the opportunity arose. In July this year, he opened Seasons by Olivier E. at Lee Gardens Two.

“Finding a partner is easy,” says Elzer, “but finding a partner who is also your landlord and someone you can work well with is difficult.”

Elzer believes that Seasons is different because it provides a casual environment and a homey atmosphere. The interior, designed with light colours, fuses elements like marble and timber. There's a Private Room, Green House, Garden Terrace and Dining Room



Grilled Holstein rib eye, cooked shallots and red wine sauce (right) and grilled langoustine, risotto venere and masala butter (below).



Green House, which represents spring.

COURTESY SEASONS BY OLIVIER E.

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– each representing winter, spring, summer and fall.

And guests there can access classic French cuisine. Seasons' food concept was to take the stiffness out of French dining. Elzer felt that people, especially in Hong Kong, like to dine casually, so he kept the flavours and techniques of French cooking but highlighted the use of seasonal ingredients. At the moment, his menu features root vegetables and truffles.

Some might assume that Elzer faced no significant challenges in opening his restaurant since he was partnering with Hysan. But he did experience some. His chief concerns were to have enough space for the kitchen and, of course, whether people would like the restaurant.

Hiring kitchen staff came easy because Elzer already had a network of chefs. His only worry was to train his staff well, to provide impeccable service. For Elzer – because training takes time, especially in Asia – staff must be passionate and detail-minded.

Seasons has been open just five months and has already gained one Michelin star. As he aims for a second star, Elzer remains modest. “We only had one goal when we opened Seasons and that was to make this happen,” he says. “We always think positively and we always try to find solutions to our problems.”

PHILIPPE ORRICO UPPER MODERN BISTRO

It was no easy road to success for Upper Modern Bistro's chef and director, Philippe Orrico. In a culinary career spanning 15 years, he has achieved remarkable feats but also encountered failure.

One of Orrico's accomplishments was when The Mandarin Oriental's French fine-dining restaurant, Pierre, gained a Michelin star in 2008. As the chef de cuisine, he led a team of 10 when Pierre opened in 2006. Yearning for a new challenge, he left the following year to take the helm at Hullett House's St George as executive chef. During his four-year tenure at St George, that restaurant gained its first star in 2011, only to lose it the very next year.

For a Michelin chef, to lose a star is indeed disappointing. But Orrico remained positive, despite the frustrations of getting no clear answer from the Michelin people on the reasons for St George's demotion. "Gaining a star is always good recognition," he says. However, "it's better to have a full restaurant with no stars than an empty restaurant with a star."

Orrico opened his first solo venture, Upper Modern Bistro, in October 2013. Located in Sheung Wan, just off Hollywood Road, the 52-seat venue quickly gained recognition for its bite-sized hot and cold tapas, as well as bistro-inspired dishes with an Asian twist.

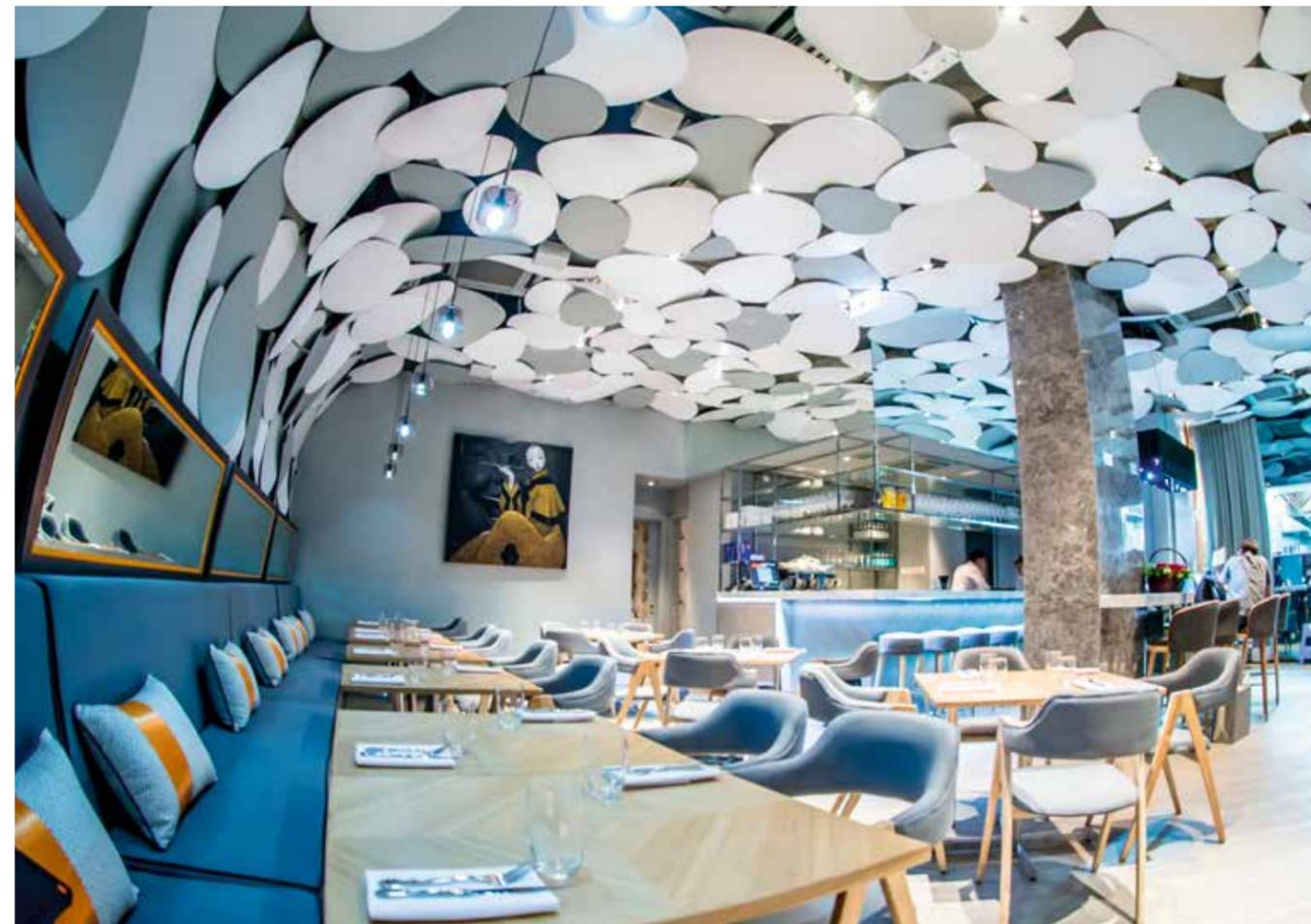
There, at his own restaurant, Orrico made the switch to bistro-style cooking. He saw a gap in the market and thought a 'modern bistro' concept would meet the demands of those looking for something in between fine dining and a casual bistro.

"I had worked for reputable chefs and fine-dining restaurants and I always felt restricted," says Orrico. "I've always wanted to open a restaurant where I can have a maximum of liberty in terms of cooking."

Immediately, the restaurant was well received, exceeding his expectations. It was essentially busy when it first opened on a Friday and Saturday night. On the Monday, there were only two guests, but on the Tuesday, reservations rose to 65. And for the following eight months, the restaurant was packed and busy for lunch and dinner, with 100 guests on the waiting list for weekends. Each table had a high turnover rate; the average number of guests per day was 150, and sometimes 250 on weekends.



COURTESY UPPER MODERN BISTRO



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Orrico knew the inevitable risks of opening a restaurant. He used up almost all of his savings of the past 15 years and at one point needed to provide a HK\$1.5 million cheque. With all that money laid on the table, he was left with just HK\$50,000 in his bank account and began to have sleepless nights.

Orrico holds the majority stake in Upper Modern Bistro because, he says, he "wanted to control everything". After finding a location, which was then three office spaces, he took the time to find investors who "can help and bring business rather than just play with their money".

Opening a new restaurant has been a steep learning curve. Although he has lived in Hong Kong for eight years now, Orrico says he had to understand some rules and regulations very specific to Hong Kong, including liquor licensing.

Hard work and perseverance paid off when Upper Modern Bistro recently gained its first Michelin star. Orrico has also just opened his second venture, ON Dining Kitchen and Lounge, a social restaurant on On Lan Street, Central, serving comfort food. "If you don't trust yourself and your ability, then don't open a restaurant," he says. "It's a new world out there because you will deal with a variety of problems compared to when you were a chef." 🍷



Mini veal burgers, served with mushroom purée (left) and a selection of cheeses.