

A Taste Of Jamaica Rocks Dubai

Smartly lit and bursting with color, achingly trendy and warmly approachable, bustling Kingston and downtown NY—Miss Lily's could be one of the funkier restaurants you step into. Equally cool and welcoming are Varun Khemanev and Khalil Dahmash, the friends and business partners that delivered the concept to Dubai.

When Varun Khemanev and Khalil Dahmash met 10 years ago they both already knew they wanted to do something different, something special. What they couldn't have imagined is that a decade later they'd have an international popstar asking for a table in their new restaurant.

"That was one of the craziest days," Dahmash laughs. "I was standing in the lounge. I'm exhausted, I'd had a full day. It's 11:30pm and the receptionist comes up to me and says she needs a lounge table. We've got four lounge tables and they're all gone. She says I need it for Rihanna, and I say Rihanna who? She says, Rihanna! I say who's Rihanna? I don't know a Rihanna. She says Khalil, you're an idiot—it's Rihanna the singer, she's outside the restaurant..."

Since it opened its doors less than a year ago, the Barbadian icon has not been the only celebrity sighting in the buzzing bar. Footballers, sports heroes and DJs have also popped by to check out the venue, drawn in by the vibe, the food and the reputation.

Already a well-established name in its hometown of New York, the Miss Lily's concept is built around a Jamaican street party. The brand is infused with music, color and flavor. Now finding its first international home in Dubai's hospitality melting pot, Miss Lily's has been brought to us thanks to the enthusiasm of two young local entrepreneurs. Having both grown up in Dubai, Dahmash and Khemanev crossed paths through family connections and mutual friends. But it wasn't until they returned home from studying stateside that their shared love of F&B brought them together in business.

After graduating in Canada, Dahmash's career started in finance. But despite landing a decent job his heart was always elsewhere. "Coming from an Arab family usually you have to be a banker, engineer or doctor," he explains. "But I always knew I was a people person, I wanted to work for myself." Constantly thinking up potential ventures, he considered everything from events management to snacks delivery before deciding his fate. And at that point he knew who to turn to. "I'd always go bother this guy and say hey Varun let's do this, hey Varun let's do that. Eventually I was like, listen, let's open a restaurant."

Khemanev came with experience. After graduating in Boston he'd moved to NYC and with a group of friends set up his first F&B venture, Tribeca Canvas. Despite the hard work and the pull of a celebrity chef, it didn't last long in the cutthroat industry, and Khemanev returned home. When Dahmash approached him, he was curious but cautious. "I got burnt in New York," he admits. "But I learnt a lot and I'd always wanted to do something in my own home court. Khalil said do you want to get back into the game and I said ok let's see, let's talk about it. One thing lead to the other and we started talking about different concepts. Miss

Lily's was something that I'd fallen in love with."

While in NYC Khemaney had found himself regularly drawn to Miss Lily's chicken roti and corn, but that wasn't the only attraction. "The food was amazing, but it was the feeling you got inside there," he says. "When I walked in I'd never seen anything like it because you got transported to this other world—everything from the staff to the music to the ambience to the people interacting in the place was so cool, and it was so unique, I literally felt like I was in Jamaica." Dahmash had also found and fallen for Miss Lily's on his trips to the city. The next step: make contact.

"A friend of mine in New York connected us," says Khemaney. "We reached out and they took our call." In this case 'they' were Miss Lily's founders Serge Becker and Paul Salmon—and they were already hearing pitches from two major hospitality companies in Dubai. It took an agonizing six months for them to make their choice.

"They had to understand who was the right fit and the right partner," Khemaney reasons. "So, we pitched to them and said this is who we are. Rather than joining a big conglomerate or someone who might put you in as one of many, we're two guys who are going to make this our full-time jobs, we're going to dedicate all our time to it and personally give it the attention it needs. If you give us Miss Lily's—the authenticity of it, the rawness of it—we will maintain it." Of course, they won the pitch.

With capital from their own pockets along with the support of two silent investors, work began to build the venue. After four months, a unique opportunity came up: a pop-up at Sole DXB, an uber-cool street culture festival in Dubai's Design District. "As a form of marketing it was direct to the people that we wanted," says Dahmash. The idea was to set up a mini jerk hut to give people a taste of what the brand had to offer. The pitch turned out to be so successful it took on a life of its own. "I approached the guys and we got along, and they said why don't you take the entire VIP lounge," Dahmash explains. "It was like a basketball court, with a bar and full tables."

The pair called in Becker, the New York chef and a team of temporary staff to pull it off, working literally around the clock to build the bar from scratch, incorporating original artwork and design ideas from the restaurant to create something that was both unique and a genuine showcase of Miss Lily's style. The sleepless nights paid off. "We served 1,500 people over two days," says Dahmash. "We'd been working so hard, for us that was our first win."

It took another eight months to complete the dream. Custom-made furniture was shipped in from New York, tabletops were hand-painted in Berlin, a local artist was brought in to graffiti the walls and craft the artwork. Approvals were sought, licenses granted. A team of chefs, management and support staff were interviewed and handpicked from across the world. In July 2016, Miss Lily's Dubai opened its doors to rave reviews.

"It was a crazy journey," Dahmash recalls. "There were some really dark times. No-one believed in us. A lot of people we pitched to were like no, no, no, we don't understand. Now it's a different story."

"It was an amazing learning experience," Khemaney agrees. "It was a long ride, but we remained resilient and we kept going. We're so grateful for how it's taken off. Business has been great, it's been well received. People tell us that they were refreshed by this type of concept. I think part of the success is that we lived, breathed, slept and ate Miss Lily's. That

enabled us to really create and keep the vibe and the details the way it should be.”

As their first success continues to grow the pair are already onto their next venture, creating their own hospitality company, VKD. “The idea is to use it as a platform to do what we want to do and what we’re passionate about in the hospitality industry,” explains Khemaney. “We’re not limiting ourselves to restaurants. We are dreamers both of us, we’d love to get into hotels in future. We’re going to start small and walk before we run.”

They won’t disclose their second project yet, but they say it will set the tone for who they are and what they stand for. And Serge Becker will be a crucial element. “I look at him as a mentor—I’d like to keep him,” Dahmash smiles.

“We want to continue to push the boundaries and grow our company smartly,” Khemaney says. “We’re blessed we have something good right now but we can’t take it for granted. We’re going to stick to our guns, keep our heads down, work hard and hopefully it will pay off in future.”

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