

EVENT REVIEW

TO THE TABLE MEA 2016

As exclusive regional press partners, *Hotelier Middle East* and *Caterer Middle East* network with the hospitality F&B industry at To The Table MEA 2016, with **Devina Divecha** reporting back on the findings from the B2B meetings' event

Photography by *Richard Pereira*

Organised by Snap Events, To The Table returned to the Middle East & Africa for the third time to serve the region's hospitality and food & beverage industry.

The event took place on September 6-8, 2016 at the Jumeirah at Etihad Towers Abu Dhabi, with *Hotelier Middle East* and *Caterer Middle East* attending as the exclusive regional press partners.

The aim of the event, as with every edition, was to connect senior F&B leaders from high-profile hotel and restaurant brands with suppliers of relevant products and services, and promote future business between buyers and suppliers who attend.

The business-to-business forum included a programme of pre-arranged one-to-one meetings, seminars sessions, networking functions and dinners.

Only the most senior buyers were invited by the organisers, and attendees were able to choose one-to-one meetings specifically as well as network with the attendees.

MEETINGS AND MORE

This year, for the first time, To The Table EMEA was split to form To The Table MEA and To The Table Europe, adding to Snap Events' roster of events, which also includes To The Table Asia.

To The Table MEA 2016 hosted 50 buyer and 60 supplier attendees, and Snap Events Ltd and To The Table director Debbie Wilson told *Hotelier Middle East*: "This year saw our best ever list of senior decision makers attending from the most prestigious hotels and restaurant groups across the MEA region."

A major part of the event was one-to-one meetings, scheduled in advance. Snap Events Ltd and To The Table director Justin Wall said: "We had a diverse list of the highest quality F&B suppliers attending, and they were able to have private, pre-selected and pre-scheduled meetings with the industry's most senior decision making buyers. The meetings programme ran like clockwork and the suppliers all collected lots of leads for future business, so we are happy with the success of the event."



One to one meetings in progress



Debbie Wilson and Justin Wall at the event

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Debbie Wilson, director, Snap Events & To The Table

In addition to the meetings, a series of networking evenings were held. On September 6, Bice at the Jumeirah at Etihad Towers hosted a welcome dinner, followed by official drinks reception and dinner on the next evening at The St. Regis Abu Dhabi.

The final evening saw a farewell party sponsored by Scottish Development International at Ray's Bar within the Jumeirah at Etihad Towers. The event's wine sponsor for all networking was Treasury Wine Estates.



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Jumeirah at Etihad Towers executive chef Oliver Jackson and chef de cuisine Niels Van Oers also held a demonstration with selected delegates to showcase the produce and wine in the hotel.

SEMINARS

To break up the three-day event of meetings and networking, seminars were held with experts in the industry to talk about a diverse range of topics, with ITP Business Hospitality Group senior editor Devina Divecha as the seminars’ host.

Wilson noted: “We had the most engaging seminar programme, with top speakers sharing their wisdom and experience. The team at the Jumeirah at Etihad Towers also did an amazing job with the F&B and the service.”

RESTAURANT DESIGN

The first day started with a panel discussion on restaurant design, with Starwood Hotels & Resorts director of F&B EMEA Stefan Breg and Keane Brands founder and CEO Aidan Keane.

Breg posed the question about how good design actually is in the restaurant business in this market, and also revealed that after conducting a survey on malls and F&B, some interesting results were produced.

“How many concepts in those sites are owner operated, franchised or independent? We found that 44% of F&B venues in the Dubai Mall were franchised, and as much as 70% of the Beach Mall is franchised. If you ran the same numbers in other GCC countries, you’d probably find the same thing.

“The restaurant scene here is largely franchised for a number of reasons,” he said. The problem, Breg pointed out, with restaurant design is cookie-cutter concepts, with a few exceptions of evolution witnessed.

While Keane commented that the market has come back “better than ever”, he said: “X Factor is killing music by pasteurising the music, and the same thing is happening in this region with F&B where they’re shipping all the trophies but there’s no originality. Any foodie scene has to have originality.”

One of the challenges, he said, was the amount of money invested. “Wealth impedes creativity — you don’t get many wealthy inventors, let’s put it that way,” said Keane.

However, he admitted there are “isolated pockets of creativity starting to come through”, and continued: “You can’t separate design and concept and content and soul — all of them have to live together, otherwise they just become a pretty picture.”



Both Breg and Keane then confirmed that it was important for the UAE to sell its own culture to the world, arguing for the need for original Emirati concepts that can be exported to the worldwide market; Breg pointed to Emirati-owned restaurant Meylas as an example of what could be realised, while Keane said developing such concepts in what is termed as 'old Dubai' is what would work.

Keane concluded: "Design only gets celebrated if everything around it is good as well."

INTERNATIONAL VERSUS HOME-GROWN CONCEPTS

On the same day, a panel discussion was held on what makes for the best restaurants in the MEA market: international or home-grown? A spot poll was conducted by Divecha at the start of the panel to ask if given a choice, would the delegates go to an international or home-grown brand. The votes were overwhelmingly for the latter.

Speaking at this panel were: Breg, representing an international hotel chain; Rotana corporate vice president food & beverage operations James Wierzelewski, representing a local hotel chain; Gates Hospitality CEO Naim Maadad, representing a home-grown restaurant business; and Busaba Eathai CEO Jason Myers, representing an international F&B business.

The panel discussion resulted in an agreement that there needed to be a balance between home-grown and international brands in the business, and



Myers commented that the challenge as a whole was convincing pure hoteliers to think about F&B as a standalone viable business. "Hoteliers think about rooms... they will always think about rooms. Some people will fight the cause, but they will always fight the cause."

Breg wondered whether standalone licences would be issued to restaurant operators on a larger scale, with Maadad confident that they would be, in the long-term.

Breg said: "We were joking the other day that there are four restaurants are opening every day, and we joked that with the steady numbers of tourists, everyone would have to eat 3.3 times a day to hit budget! Something's got to give if the huge growth continues."

Myers added: "Brands that have been created for the community will stick around, and international brands will have to get the right locations and get the right PR and buzz [to survive]."

TALENT DEVELOPMENT

On the final day, a session was held on the value of talent in the industry and relationships in the industry. Moderated by The Cutting Edge Agency founder and managing director Duncan Fraser-Smith, participants included Caterers Lab founder and F&B operations specialist Elena Akopiants and Strategic Staffing managing director and founder Nicolas Pierre.

Fraser-Smith started off the conversation by quoting Danny Meyer's lines on hospitality being a dialogue, with discussion following on topics of interest including salary levels in the industry (not standardised was the opinion), poaching (all cautioned against it), and succession plans.

With the final point, Fraser-Smith posed the question: "What are the ways in which we can create recognition initiatives, and deliver that essence of engagement, interest and passion from our side back to them?"

Akopiants commented: "It's about constantly showing gratitude. Obviously it goes down to simple things, like saying 'thank you'. I see a lot of managers being demanding, pushy and never saying 'thank you' to people."

She added: "Another story is definitely creating the atmosphere where everybody feels the way the things are going there is a fair treatment for everyone. I see a lot of favouritism happening in restaurants. Internal promotion is a very important thing as well. It raises the morale of the team."

However, Pierre cautioned: "You need to be careful with promotions. If we're promoting to keep our staff and we over-promote, then they're going to leave. That's a big danger. A lot of people [in this industry] are, right now, in a position that they should not be in." ■

