



ENOTECA GROUP MANAGEMENT LTD.

Buena Comida, Vino, y Compañía

Director and Restuarador ROBERT COOPER shares how his fusion tapas and wine selection continue to be the talk of the town.

International cuisine and fine wine are never in short supply in Hong Kong. Much rarer are establishments that withstand the test of time, in a region where anything from rent to riot can ruin a promising restaurant. Robert Cooper's Enoteca Group has demonstrated longevity and growth, besting the odds for a decade straight.

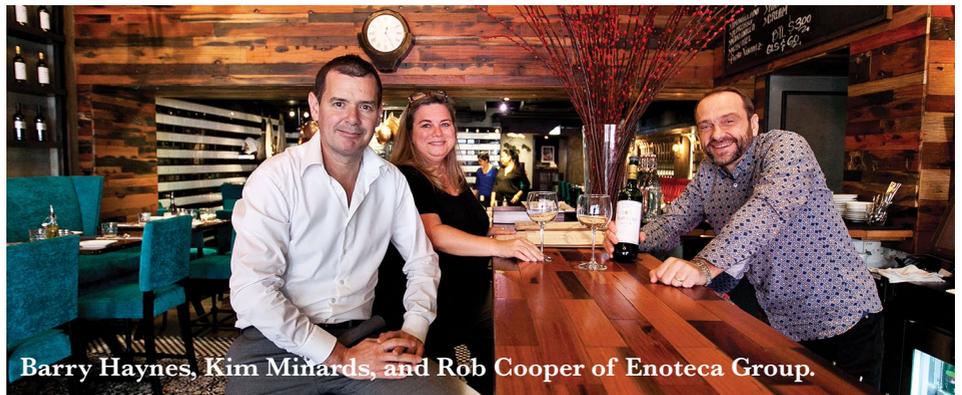
"Our boutique restaurant concept and management business had very humble beginnings, starting shortly after Kim (Minards, Managing Director) and I married in Hong Kong, in 2004. We both worked our way up the industry from waiters to General Managers and decided to step off the cliff, opening our own small wine bar 'Enoteca on Elgin' in the then emergent Soho district in 2005.

"We worked opposite shifts with no day off for the first year and paid back our investors' HK\$2.5 million loan in 11 months – fast by industry standards. Kim handled food design and menu development with a local chef while I managed the wines and beverage. The rest was handshaking, entertaining, and hours of training and nurturing staff."

Going Uphill

Working long hours to tight margins while raising two children put immense pressure on the couple in the beginning. "We managed all facets of the business ourselves – legal matters, accounts, tax, HR, labour law, etc. – whilst working full service shifts day and night," says Cooper. "With no head office team to fall back on we learnt to be company directors as we went along."

The sacrifice paid off; Enoteca's sheer popularity forced the company's initial expansion. "We couldn't turn tables fast enough. We responded by quickly launching two other complementary styled wine bars in the area. This way we captured more market share on the



Barry Haynes, Kim Minards, and Rob Cooper of Enoteca Group.

escalator. Not many Mid-Levels residents could get past us without being grabbed by our waving, smiling staff!"

Meeting consistent success, the company opened a number of subsequent establishments, with three more in the works. "Our fifth restaurant, Iberico & Co. opened in 2012. We consider it our best project to date in terms of design and menu. We are reopening our Asian tapas restaurant Cicada and a yet to be named Asian gastropub, both in Soho. Sun Hung Kai Properties has invited us to take our Iberico & Co. concept to the new YOHO mega mall in Yuen Long, which opens its doors this September. Our first Enoteca on Elgin is still going strong, ten years on."

The Niceties

"Friendliness is a core operating mantra," says Cooper. "We hold the simplest belief that being friendlier is the key in the very competitive world of high street bars and restaurants. Good food, great wine, knowledgeable staff and smart service are of course, important; but by being a little more human and tactile and a lot more fun and kind, we were always able to get even the most difficult guest to leave smiling and happy.

"Generosity was another key area we addressed. Just by giving that extra 10% in a glass of wine or an extra meatball in tapas creates a sense of satisfaction

and value for money. If guests ask for an extra piece or another splash, we don't charge for it. If they genuinely don't like something, we take it off the bill without question. It's the little generous details that you are remembered for."

Outstanding People

"We place huge trust and faith in our younger outlet managers," says Cooper. "The devil is in the detail and the temptation to micromanage is constant, but we have learnt that giving them a free hand, in turn frees us to direct and grow the business.

"We have invested a lot into key individuals over the years, promoting almost exclusively from within. Many of our senior managers have been with us from the start. David Tamlyn our Group Executive Chef was invaluable with his menu work at Iberico & Co. and Barry Haynes our Group Operations Manager tirelessly oversees all day-to-day operations, finally allowing us a bit of time to ourselves!" ■

For additional information please visit www.enotecagroup.com

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