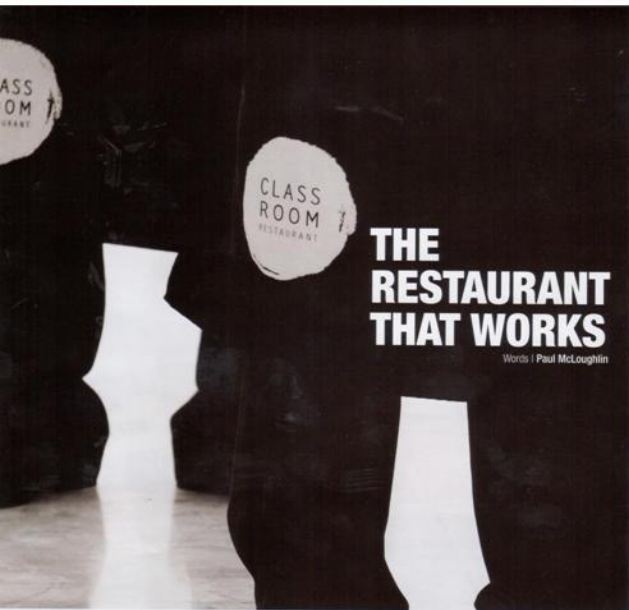


Y MAGAZINE 24 January 2012



**THE RESTAURANT THAT WORKS**

Words | Paul McLoughlin

There are few trades so clearly hierarchal as the culinary industry, yet few so egalitarian. It's a career where if you work hard and show initiative you're likely to progress up the ranks. Formal education is generally of second importance to experience. One college in Oman has been combining both elements to create a unique learning environment for budding hospitality students. The National Hospitality Institute in Wadi Kabir offers a framework where students can learn techniques in the classroom, and then try them out first-hand in a real working environment. "The doors are open, the pressure is on, and it's real pressure too. A customer coming into this environment expects to be dined and looked after. But we've kept it going, and we're proud to have offered it as a real restaurant," says Robert McLean, the school's principle. The NHI's 'The Classroom' is a working restaurant where students undergo vocational training, developing their skills by attending to real customers, preparing meals and beverages, and then picking

up on any challenges they may face along the way. The open kitchen format of the restaurant helps ease the level of trust between the customer and the student, which adds a dynamic sense of interaction between the two groups, which cannot be seen anywhere else in Oman. Robert is an energetic and positive man, and believes this model could work well for the country in other areas of business. "I don't know any other institute in the region that actually exposes itself to the public in this way," he says. "That's what makes it unique. We're not just a restaurant."

Robert calls this 'Lunch Plus' as you're not just paying for a meal, but also contributing to the development of the students at the school. Five percent of the bill goes towards the Early Intervention Centre, an organisation that the NHI has been keenly supporting over the years. Prices at the restaurant are reasonable, and standards are high, not just

because of the cautious eye of Robert and the staff, but also due to the level of passion amongst students to ensure that customers leave with a smile, as well as a full belly. It's this level of professionalism and careful grooming which is much needed in the Sultanate, as the country works to promote Oman to the outside world, as a 'luxury' destination. Sadly, high levels of service are missing in the hospitality industry here, and as this week's Y Facebook question confirms, standards are generally way below customers' expectations. The NHI, however, has seen many success stories: Oman Air's Food Production Manager Fuad Al-Hinai,

along with Oman TV's Issa Lamki, were all former students here, and Robert believes that they will shape many more talented hotel managers and chefs in the coming years. The real achievement, however, is the number of graduates who go on to find work at hotels and restaurants across Oman, with little difficulty. In a country where the youth often



mentally and physically challenging as possible, to fit with the expectations of the industry. "We try to go as high as we can, if we try to train to Al Bustan standards but a student is signed up for a 3-star hotel, he has the skills to move on. A lot of people say why bother with silver service, but we find that a lot of people we train go on to work on silver service in banqueting. We have a policy where we train them up for more than they have to do, so it gives them more abilities later on in life." Robert describes this fast-paced learning environment as being something of a culinary boot camp, where students

learn a vast amount about the trade in a short space of time. They also benchmark themselves against the highest standards in the industry, and nowhere is this seen better than when students prepare the banquets for the famed gourmet society, Chaine des Rôtisseurs at Bandar Al Rowdha. The NHI uses such events to bring together Oman's gastronomic experts, to



complain about a lack of work opportunities after graduation, then the NHI could be a good brand for other higher learning institutions to follow.

Vocational learning has been proven to create the most effective and useful learning environment for students to follow, and is especially beneficial for less academically gifted students. Yet the learning at the NHI is made to be as

provide an opportunity for students to put their skills to the test, as well as doing their bit to help the community - "We charged Chaine members 64 rials for a meal, with a fantastic menu, and we used the extra 40 rials of the cost to give to charity," Robert says.

Robert also points out the dynamic, multi-national environment that the NHI fosters which the principle believes will prepare



students for the realities of the trade. Workforces in the hospitality industry tend to be incredibly diverse, he says, and working as part of a team with people from other backgrounds is a vital skill students must learn. However, Robert also believes it's up to hotels and restaurants to adapt more to the needs of the local workforce. "It's been a very much expat-dominated job in Oman, until recently, so there wasn't much need for missions and visions, training and development; people thought that if someone couldn't do the job they'd find someone else to do it. You can't do that if you have a local workforce, you need to develop people," he says. Robert says that the training on offer generally benefits lower-income groups in Oman, who travel from across the country to study at the institute. Lodgings are provided for a nominal fee, and the opportunities for employment at one of the top hotels and restaurants in Muscat is a real possibility for graduates. Working in a multinational setting also helps to boost the Arabic-speaking students' English language skills, which is put to the test in a fun and engaging way during the NHI's fun days. Students are expected to present a song, play or talk to the school, as part of a group, in English, which boosts their confidence tremendously. "It's brilliant! Some of the things they come out with is fantastic. There are also awards for group accomplishments, such as those with the best attendance, fostering a level of comradeship amongst



students that push one another to perform better. "The prize is a day off. The lesson is you get the time off, but you have to earn it. In the future, your boss will say well done, get a day off," he says. That's a lesson most students also find most rewards to learn about, first-hand.

You can sponsor the education of a youngster at the NHI for as little as the price of two coffees a day. To find out more about the National Hospitality Institute, visit the website [www.nhioman.com](http://www.nhioman.com)