



AN *experimental* EDGE

*As the newest concept store-cum-restaurant in Dubai's d3, **The Lighthouse** founder Hashem Montasser reveals to Katrina Kufer his winning ethos of timelessness, minimalism and innovation*

Hashem Montasser, co-founder Hany Bassiouny and third partner, Chef Izu Ani, formed The Lighthouse nine months ago on a foundation of a shared conceptual language. With years in entrepreneurial banking and lingering interests in design, Montasser and Bassiouny acted upon a lack of gifting outlets that catered to a niche, artisanal market. "I don't want to say eccentric, but off the beaten path," clarifies Montasser of his desire to separate from malls and department stores. "Seeing concepts like Colette, Corso Como, Merci... We realised there is a market for finding funky products and marrying the concept with food. Food and design speak the same language, and we are interested in that intersection."

Named The Lighthouse for its applicability to an F&B or retail outlet, it nods to Montasser and Bassiouny's heritage through the Lighthouse of Alexandria in Egypt, and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a writer on whom Montasser's mother earned her PhD. The AAC Interiors-designed space reads equally as a museum gift shop with everything from art and cooking books, tableware, home decor and candles, as a hip, casual sharing-concept eatery with Mediterranean influences. The spaces seamlessly blend together. "It's a holistic experience," says Montasser. "We focus on lifestyle themes: food, design, art, but with a quirkiness, a little bit of daring and something unexpected."

Given that this format is new for the UAE, The Lighthouse is drawing a crowd out of the woodwork. "We were surprised!" remarks Montasser. "I worked in DIFC for over 10 years and I rarely saw the customers we have coming here now! I think there was a big group of people in Dubai waiting and craving something a little bit different." Noting that the local audience is increasingly interested in bespoke, niche and homegrown ventures, Montasser felt Dubai's maturing market was ripe for the kind of outlet often found across Europe and North America. Building on the idea of an experiential venue, especially in the advent of the online, the licensed outlet "is a space where you can walk in, it's casual but high quality, has a beautiful terrace where you can sit and have a drink, or read a book." It provides alternatives – a trend that Montasser feels Dubai will be seeing more of – without trying to cater to all tastes.

While the crowd is predominantly the creative d3 inhabitants, Ani's La Petite Maison and La Serre track record has brought in another facet to help put The Lighthouse on the map. All, however, are linked by a dedication to quality. "Izu doesn't believe in shortcuts or chasing trends, and the beauty of Dubai is that you can bring all these disparate elements together," says Montasser. Unafraid of experimentation – or a little trial and error – "We are constantly adapting," explains Montasser, adding that d3 was the ideal platform with which to evolve.

The Lighthouse's gauge of authenticity remains on track because they serve as their own target audience. "I trust my instinct, but that's not enough. We spend at least a year researching a new brand or product," he says of distinguishing between 'good' design and

simply 'cool' design. Whether selecting the off-piste tomes – Montasser quips that his vacation photographs are 80 percent book titles and displays – flatware and cutlery, skincare or décor, "I ask myself, 'Would I want to buy that product? Would it be as interesting a year from now as it is today?'" and test them before we stock them." The process of selecting timeless, functional and aesthetically pleasing brands is laborious but worth it: "We'd rather have a few high quality products that last a lifetime than gifting items which may be pleasing to the eye but aren't necessarily functional. In that regard, we believe in buying less, but better," he adds.

Nearly everything in The Lighthouse is for sale. The plates upon which the in-house made avocado labneh, tuna tartar, French toast, or salads are served are designed by Piet Boon and available for purchase, same for the Alcarol wood and acrylic screen at the entrance, HAM's rabbit decorated mugs and stationary (Montasser begins each day with his HAM coffee mug), natural beauty products by The Moroccans, pebble and shell glazed ceramics from Mushimegane Books. And soon, an increased inventory of regional designers. The Lighthouse supports over 45 brands, curating and rotating the collections on a monthly basis. "We have to keep it

fresh, and 60-70 percent of the brands, or some of their collections, are exclusive to us, including the Basquiat and Andy Warhol candles by Ligne Blanche."

The Lighthouse is aiming high. "In Dubai, things catch up with you," observes Montasser. "You have to stay fresh, be forward thinking. Adding a cultural layer is important." Having already initiated a speaker series, hosted a Christie's book signing for Mahmoud Said, as well as an Art Dubai event featuring Ahmed Matar, Montasser cites Art Dubai and Alserkal Avenue as entities with which he would like to align. "We want to be part of that dialogue, it's a natural fit, and whether private events or collaborations, we are fortunate to be in a position to add to the conversation on an individual basis." This includes managing the F&B at Downtown Design, where they will bring their food, retail

and DJ in pop-up form – perhaps including Ani's upcoming menu additions such as the falafel souvlaki, "which I naturally like because I'm Egyptian," Montasser laughs. "People come more and more for an overall experience, so it's important that food speaks the same way," he says. "We're excited to bring in these new elements – it's a nice way to round out our concept and pull it all together." ■

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