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CELEBRATING UAE'S ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT



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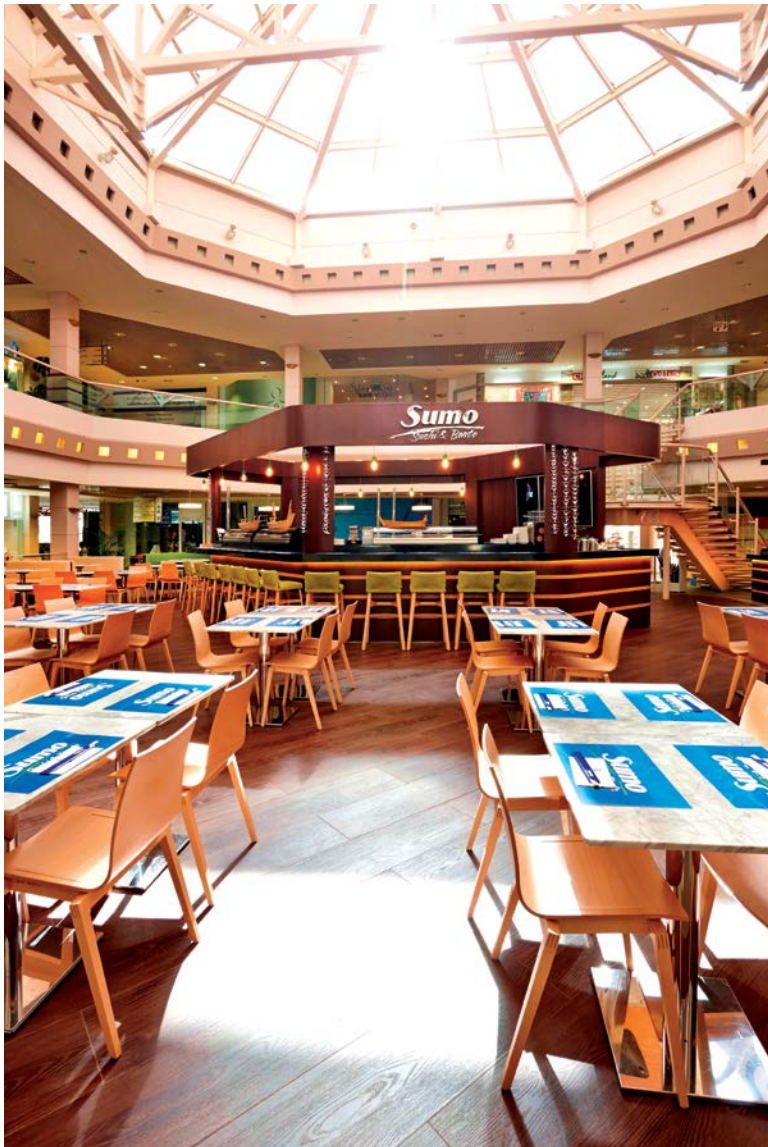
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Forming meaningful collaborations, focus on the community on the forefront of our strategy for **2023**



Sumo Sushi & Bento emerges stronger

In an exclusive interview with **Rupkatha Bhowmick**, Sumo Sushi & Bento CEO **Julianne Holt-Kailihiwa** talks about the restaurant chain's evolution, learnings and growth strategy for 2023 & beyond.

Okinawa in Japan happens to be a 'blue zone' – one of the five places globally that is home to world's longest living populations. Besides genes and way of life, longevity of Okinawa residents has been linked to their diet. A key reason why Japanese cuisine has steadily gained popularity across the world. Mainly comprising vegetables, rice and seafood – now even vegan and plant-based ingredients – Japanese cuisine is considered not only healthy but also sustainable. A cuisine that "keeps evolving silently in new ways," as aptly summarised by Eric C. Rath, a historian at the University of Kansas.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that a not-so-popular cuisine even two decades ago in our region, the Middle East, is now a firm favourite among diners. If anything, the increasing number of restaurants focused on sushi and ramen is a testament to the growing popularity of the Japanese cuisine. Fondness for sushi is nothing short of a revolution.

Amid deep competition and changing demographics and demands one restaurant chain has constantly evolved all the while resonating with its tribe. From the era of "why is this fish raw" to Emirati teens creating "we're eating sushi" TikTok videos, this restaurant chain's over two decades long journey in the region has been long and interesting. We're talking about Sumo Sushi & Bento.

50% reduction in operating units

"From 21 locations pre-pandemic we are currently at 10 units- 3 in Bahrain, 2 in Cyprus and the rest in Dubai (3 corporate and rest franchised units). That's half of what we were pre-Covid," Kailihiwa said. "While our franchisees have exited some markets, we've entered others such as Cyprus towards early 2021.

What's interesting is that the overall performance of the operating units has improved with many performing better than pre-Covid. Going forward Sumo Sushi and Bento's strategy is to open corporate/own stores over franchised units. It makes one wonder if the strategy is based on the brand's experience of owned stores emerging from the pandemic fitter and more agile.

But Kailihiwa quickly pointed out, "It was more about the location. Some mall-based, foot traffic reliant, dine-in locations didn't perform well throughout the pandemic, although they were doing significant deliveries."

The restaurant chain has also decided to shrink the size of its units the sweet spot hovering somewhere around 1,500-2,000sqft – "1,800sqft works best in most areas," Kailihiwa shared.

Our team has doubled from **100+ people** to over **250**; we are consciously investing to develop talent and ensure cultural diversity

An inspiring ‘feat’

A brand that’s discerning about local habits, attentive to global trends; a brand built in the UAE that’s inspiring the world. Above everything what makes Level Shoes a vibrant and inspiring destination is its people, emphasises **Elisa Bruno**, the brand’s Managing Director

By *Rupkatha Bhowmick*

A decade ago, a luxury footwear district— you could call it a shoe lover’s paradise too – opened at the heart of The Dubai Mall. The idea was to create a happy place for shoe lovers. The intent was to inspire everyone who set foot into the gargantuan space through memorable interactions and unique storytelling evoking a sense of wonderment. If anything, over the past decade Chalhoub Group’s luxury homegrown brand Level Shoes has redefined footwear shopping.

Through its unparalleled and bespoke choice of footwear, a highly personalised and seamless shopping experience and excitement at every turn – imagine getting a foot spa done while sipping coffee as you wait for your customised sneaker – Level Shoes has become a name to reckon with.

People at heart

How to engage with the community? How to surprise visitors every day? How to inspire and enrich talent? These are key questions that Level Shoes is always thinking about.

“We’ve always treated Level Shoes as an incubator of ideas,” Bruno stated. “Today as our team has doubled from 100+ people to over 250 we are consciously investing to develop talent and ensure cultural diversity. With our people representing over 80 nationalities, they are fully capable of having meaningful conversations with our customers from the region and globally which is a huge differentiator. Especially since we receive visitors from across the world.”

Technology is an enabler but it’s the people who are delivering experiences, creating memorable moments.

Humanising tech

Digital transformation has happened at Level Shoes in phases and now the brand has reached “maturity” as a hybrid retailer.

“The way we navigate across different platforms – brick-and-mortar, online, app, social media – is truly remarkable. And we’ve achieved this by humanising technology pieces. We live in a digitally savvy world and in one of the most digitalised regions globally. The youth, particularly, is embracing new ways of shopping. They are interacting with brands differently. Even a few years ago a luxury retailer wouldn’t think about using emojis while communicating with customers.”



Elisa Bruno
Managing Director, Level Shoes



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An Ode to UAE's Entrepreneurial Spirit

If you think about it, even 15 years ago the phrase '*riadat al'aemal*' – that translates to entrepreneurship in English – didn't even properly exist in Arabic parlance. Yet the spirit of entrepreneurship always existed in the UAE ever since the time of pearl diving and fishing. From humble beginnings as corner shops to bustling trade in souks to globally known mega-businesses – if anything, the undying spirit of entrepreneurship has continued to evolve. Over the decades creating an ecosystem that's driven by constant innovation and a real urge to make a difference in the community, country and the world.

Entrepreneurship plays a key role in the UAE's economic framework. The UAE's "Fifty Economic Plan" clearly outlines entrepreneurship as a strategic priority with a goal "to stimulate entrepreneurship and small and medium enterprises, spread the culture of entrepreneurship among future generations and establish the position of the UAE as a global hub and destination for entrepreneurship."

A vision that has constantly fuelled innovation and the unquenchable thirst to excel. There was a time when the UAE's retail landscape was largely driven by concepts/brands imported into the region. But 50 years on, today we are arguably in a 'From the UAE to the World' era that's all set to get even more exciting and dynamic as we look ahead to the next 50.

Ahead of the 51st UAE National Day here's our ode to the UAE's entrepreneurial spirit by celebrating Emirati entrepreneurs who have shaped the country's retail fabric, the 'Legacy Builders'; along with the 'Innovators' who are making the space more vibrant and the promising 'Start-ups to Watch'. Through this list of 30 Emirati entrepreneurs, we aim to spotlight every such individual who has and continues to make invaluable contribution in driving the UAE's already thriving entrepreneurial economy forward.

METHODOLOGY

This list has been put together based on our editorial selection. The editorial team at RetailME conducted research from publicly available sources; used existing information in our archives; and interviewed founders. All details published are verified by the featured businesses. Despite multiple attempts some foremost Emirati founders could not be featured due to lack of explicit permission from them and/or their team.



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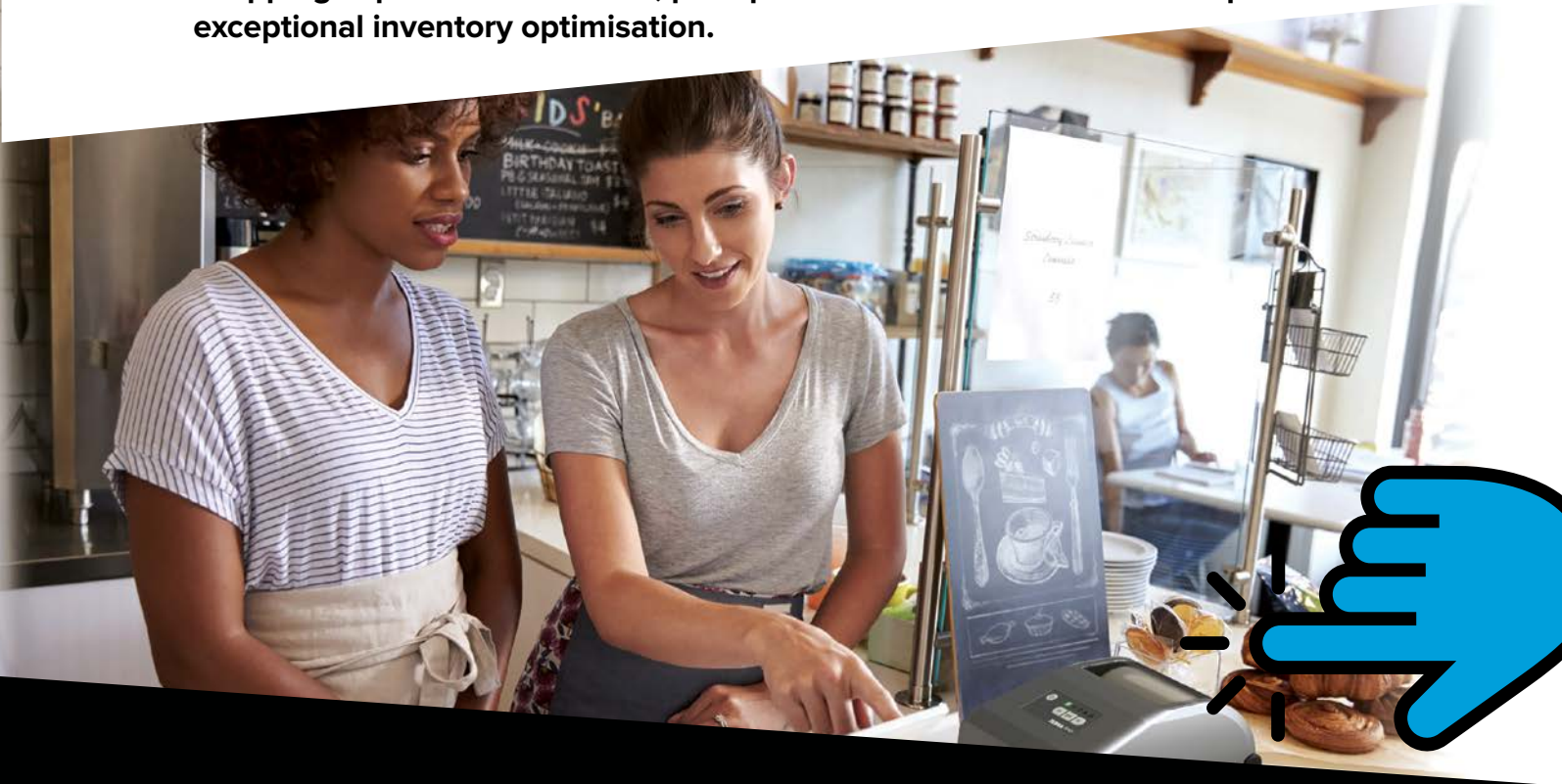
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