

COMPANIES TO WATCH

CASE STUDIES 3: FOOD & HOSPITALITY

Preface:

Creating a business that works for your neighbourhood requires equal amounts of enthusiasm and empathy; these companies have just the right chemistry.



HOTELS

Unanimous verdict

After seven years practising law in Manhattan, Liz Lambert returned to her native Texas looking for a change. She found it when she discovered that a curious yet long-admired hotel in Austin's South Congress district was days away from coming on the market. On a whim, Lambert convinced her mother to co-sign for the property and suddenly a Manhattan lawyer was a Texas hotelier, albeit one lacking experience and a proper staff. "In the beginning I spent my days practising law and my nights trying to fix the hotel's vacuum cleaner," says Lambert. Learning the business on the fly, she approached six banks before receiving financing to modernise the aging property. Following a top-to-bottom remodel and lots of hands-on learning, Lambert managed to make the Hotel San Jose a success. She has since opened three additional properties: the Saint Cecilia in Austin, Hotel Havana in San Antonio and El Cosmico in Marfa. Details ranging from Hästens mattresses and Smeg minibars at the Saint Cecilia to eccentric safari tents at El Cosmico are typical of Lambert's style. — BA [bunkhousegmt.com](#)

WHY IT WORKS: Service is relaxed but covers all the bases in these charming, authentic neighbourhood hotels.



CHOCOLATE MAKER

Crazy for cocoa

With a love of chocolate running as thick as blood in this Brazilian family, four of the Aquim clan are behind the business. The matriarch of the

family, Luiza, is one of Brazil's preeminent chefs, and her passion for produce has rubbed off on her children: Rodrigo (pictured), Samantha and Rafael. "To say you're passionate is something of a cliché in the entrepreneurial world," says Rodrigo, the company president, "but I would say we're in search of the sublime." Thanks to João Tavares, a farmer from Ilhéus – the capital of cocoa production – the beans are plucked, peeled, roasted and ground to draw out the flavour. The boxes the chocolates come in are designed to reflect architect Oscar Niemeyer's principles, making this a truly Brazilian product. — JO [aquimgastronomia.com.br](#)

WHY IT WORKS: The Aquims have a natural sense of how to craft food. Simple processes and quality ingredients are key.



PHOTOGRAPHER: RAINER BOSCH

HOTELS

Made in Mexico

There was a time when travelling to Mexico meant Hiltons for business travelers and kitschy coastal *palapas* for those seeking a bit of sun. All of this changed with the arrival of Mexico City hoteliers Grupo Habita. Properties range from Maison Couturier, a luxurious nine-room *pension agricola* near Veracruz, to Downtown Mexico, a restored 17th-century palace that has just opened in the capital's Colonia Centro. With 15 properties in total, including the Hotel Americano in New York and a second US project currently underway in Austin, Grupo Habita has altogether changed the fabric of Mexico's hospitality

industry. The men behind the business are Carlos Couturier (pictured) and Moisés Micha, former classmates whose first projects involved developing old townhouses into contemporary commercial spaces. The two partners make it a point to leverage their strengths: Couturier does concepts and Micha focuses on operations. Though their hotels are known for their sophisticated designs, service is paramount, not least providing visitors with unique access to their surroundings. "Our guests want to have access to what locals do in the city and relax in a good atmosphere," says Micha. — BA [grupohabita.mx](#)

WHY IT WORKS: Smart design is coupled with a focus on making guests feel at home. The constant search for the best emerging neighbourhoods and rural destinations is paying off.

CAFÉ

Capital coffee

Tucked away on the edge of Madrid's Malasaña district, Toma Café has established itself as a local beacon despite being open for less than a year. Founders Santi Rigoni from Argentina and Patricia Alda Diaz from Spain are juggling advertising and marketing jobs, but still manage to run their thriving business on the side. "After travelling outside of Spain, we realised that while coffee consumption in Madrid was high, there was no focus on quality," says Alda Diaz. Rigoni has his own wisdom to share from the Argentinean economic crisis. "Even though people had less to spend, they still spent their money on quality products," he recalls. The couple started their first barista courses in August and their



espresso bar is set to double in size, meaning they can roast their own coffee. — LA [tomacafe.es](#)

WHY IT WORKS: A commitment to staff-education programmes and "coffee classrooms" for customers..



PHOTOGRAPHER: BERNI BURRICO

RESTAURANT IN A SALVAGE YARD

All in the presentation

"I've been cooking since I could reach the stove and started working in restaurants when I was 16," says Jackson Boxer (right), the man behind London's successful Brunswick House in Vauxhall, and the recently opened Rita's Bar and Dining in Dalston.

Along with his brother and business partner Frank (left), who he collaborated with to launch Frank's Campari Bar in Peckham, Jackson has notched up some of the capital's most original food offers in recent years. "Cooking is simple stuff," he maintains. "You take lovely things and put them together considerably, but it's the world you build around it that makes a meal distinct and memorable."

And few locations can be more memorable than Lasso, the architectural salvage yard that's an Aladdin's cave-like backdrop to Brunswick – making it a risky place for a well-lubricated meal, as everything is for sale. "As a business, food is pretty hopeless, restaurants are horribly expensive to run," says Jackson. "Good thing then that it's all such marvellous fun." — JO [brunswickhousecafe.com](#)

WHY IT WORKS: Honest, great quality food that taps into a no-frills craving taking London by storm. They also put the arts of service and setting back on centre stage.



PHOTOGRAPHER: JESSICA LONG

CAFÉ

Better beans

Coffee is easy to come by in Seoul; good coffee is a different story. Fortunately, in 2008, Jong-Koo Bang opened Coffee Lab near Hongdae University, and has set a higher standard for the city. At a small ground-floor facility nearby, Bang personally selects his green beans and roasts them on Petroncini and Diedrich machines. "When the new harvest comes we do cuppings and I might try more than 200 types of beans," he says. Bang learned his trade in Italy and won South Korea's barista championship in 2005. Opened in the heart of Seoul's indie music neighbourhood, the shop now caters to local musicians and media workers alike with unconventional offerings, such as the *caffè con birra* (coffee with beer) and *Sanai* ("Brave man") coffee: an alcohol-coffee mix designed as a pre-performance pick-me-up. In 2010, Bang opened a tiny takeaway shop, Coffee Lab Express, but he has no big expansion plans. "I can't be everywhere," he says. "I think it's only possible to run three shops." — KH [327-19 Seogyo-dong, Mapo-gu](#)

WHY IT WORKS: Bang experiments with roasts and beans to showcase coffee's flavours, and all baristas are formally trained. By keeping the business small and focused, Bang delivers an exceptional core offer.