

# Caterer

Middle East

Serving the region's catering professionals

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## A taste of Tribes

The team behind *Caterer's* New Outlet of the Year reveals how its celebration of modern tribal life has redefined mall dining in Dubai





Cover story  
Tribes



# A taste of Tribes

Why the unrivalled passion of the team behind modern African restaurant Tribes secured the eatery the coveted title of *Caterer Middle East's* New Outlet of the Year

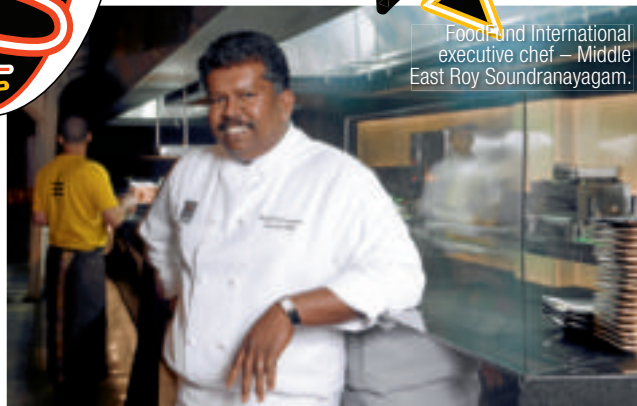


**F**or the first time, the Caterer Middle East Awards 2011 set out to find and reward the best new restaurant, bar or café in the Middle East. The competition for this award, New Outlet of the Year 2011, was phenomenal and the top five shortlisted outlets comprised some well-known names, located in popular Dubai hotels and even the world's tallest building: At.mosphere at Burj Khalifa; Rhodes Twenty10 at Le Royal Méridien Beach Resort and Spa; West Beach Bistro & Sports Lounge, Mövenpick Hotel Jumeirah Beach; and West 14<sup>th</sup>, Oceana Beach Club on the Palm Jumeirah. The fifth name, however, was slightly less familiar, and to the untrained eye, could have been considered the underdog of the group. So, just how did Tribes, Mall of the Emirates — a casual, mall-based modern African eatery created by FoodFund International — win over the Caterer Middle East Awards judges?





Tribes made a lasting impression on the judges thanks to its imaginative concept, its refreshing recruitment philosophy, its bravery in introducing a niche offering and the restaurant's success and popularity so far, something to surely be celebrated in Dubai's highly competitive mall dining market. To find out more, *Louise Oakley* visited the team at Tribes to understand the essence of the brand and how, in just one year, the restaurant has made such an impact on Dubai's dining scene.



*“The brief for me about two and half years ago was the name ‘Tribes’ – ‘chef here is the name, come up with the menu’”*

### The Tribes DNA

I defy anyone to walk into Tribes and not be enamoured, even if just a little bit, with its take on modern African tribal life — the restaurant celebrates this in every way possible; through the décor, the design, the menu, the servers and the entertainment. The restaurant itself is a modern cave, with diners' attention drawn to the reassuring fireplace in its depths. Servers greet you in their tribal language and can tell stories of their tribal heritage — whether Berber, Zula or Ndebele, every member of staff has been recruited from African tribes.

The people behind Tribes are absolutely, unapologetically, passionate about everything the brand encompasses — and no wonder; they spent several years developing the concept, even before the fortuitous Fashion Dome location was secured with Majid Al Futtaim. That it has been a labour of love is evident in everyone involved,

from FoodFund International's down-to-earth head of UAE operations Joe Van Jaarsveld through to his vibrant comrade, head of marketing Middle East and London Mona Ibrahim.

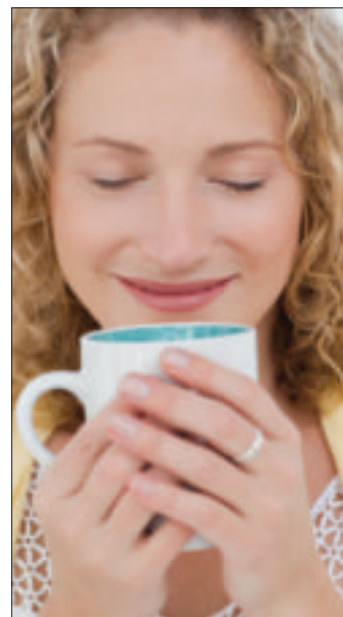
The first Tribes was opened in South Africa in 2000 by FoodFund International chairman Costa Tomazos. Following the company's successful Middle East launches of The Meat Co. and Ribs and Rumps — brands which already existed in Africa and Australia respectively — the company desired to bring Tribes to the region too.

However, as Van Jaarsveld explains, this was not merely a case of exporting the existing model, the product had to be tailored to the Middle East.

“It's important to understand that the Tribes that we had in South Africa was not what we could bring here. To bring it here we had to reinvent it and mould it into a concept that would work here. We had

the basic feel as far as texture, colour, smell — those intimate parts of that brand we understood — it was then moulding it into something that was going to be dynamic in the Middle East. That was where this team of people that understood the Middle East market came in, having brought The Meat Co. here, having brought Ribs and Rumps here, knowing who we were, knowing our demographics and saying right, ‘how do we take this concept and create the concept here that will just absolutely blow people away?’”

The focus was on ensuring that Tribes would be distinguished in the Middle East and this, according to Mona Ibrahim, meant creating “a brand DNA, a living document” that everyone in the company adhered to. The essence of this brand, she says, is “a celebration of modern tribal life”, and this is what informs every element of the Tribes model.



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## Tribes



FoodFund International credits Tribes, Mall of Emirates Fashion Dome's success to its 62-strong team of enigmatic servers and chefs, all recruited from Africa.

"We know that for us, with our customers, it's not just about serving food and it's not just about exceptional service, it's about the entire alchemy of a whole experience, so we wanted to offer the people of the Middle East an experience that hasn't been done yet," explains Ibrahim. "What is that? It's the intrigue that this brand offers, the mysticism, appealing to all of their senses through the taste of spices of Africa, the sounds of the entertainment, the connection to their soul through the drumming, the engaging staff, the artifacts, the décor, the earthy, organic nature of the design — all of this comes into the customer's experience.

"We felt in order for us to really bring something successful to the region, we had to offer and celebrate all these things in every single experience for our customer," she asserts.

"We don't just do it once for a month, we do it every single day for every single customer, consistently, effectively and passionately — and this is why it is a successful brand," Ibrahim states.

### Focus on food

Tribes' DNA may be all-encompassing but there are two elements that deserve a special focus: firstly, the food and secondly, the people.

Like the rest of the Tribes team, FoodFund International executive chef — Middle East Roy Soundranayagam started with a blank sheet.

"The brief for me about two and half years ago was the name 'Tribes' — 'chef here is the name, come up with the menu. Take the African continent and do it'," recalls Soundranayagam. "So you have



Mona Ibrahim, head of marketing — Middle East and London.

*"People don't just say the food is quality and exceptional, they say it's tasty"*

Arabic, French, Indian, English, and Portuguese influences, that was enough for me."

Van Jaarsveld expands: "Because Africa was colonised, you

had these European influences that came into certain parts of Africa, Arabic influences that came into the northern part of Africa, we were able to take those influences and looking at the essence of our DNA, celebrating modern tribal life, we were able to take those influences and bring them into today's cooking. And that was Roy's challenge — he had to take the traditional and look at putting a modern spin on it with that colonisation."

One of the opportunities, explains the chef, was to work with different parts of the animal, aside from the premium cuts used in FoodFund International's steakhouses.

"I got the opportunity to use the oxtail, the tongue, the cheeks, the different parts of the animal that people work with less because it takes a





## Cover story Tribes



lot of braising, poaching or confiting,” says Soundranayagam.

Produce is sourced from all around the world and each dish is created with one main aim — to be tasty.

“People don’t just say the food is quality and exceptional, they say it’s tasty,” says Ibrahim.

Oxtail has become the most popular dish, says Tribes general manager Majdi Romdhani.

“The majority of our customers want to try all of our menu,” says Romdhani. “We have some unusual mocktails too, the most popular is the Brainwash.”

In addition, he says many people will opt for two or three courses, thus doing away with the preconception that mall dining has to be fast dining.

“What’s happened at Tribes is the experience that you get makes you want to linger a little longer, that means we have our in-and-outs but what we are creating as well is a place in the mall where people can come and relax, and enjoy,” adds Van Jaarsveld.

“While we have discussed the DNA and great food and the décor, what makes people linger longer is an overall experience that is accentuated by people. We recruited from the GM down for personality, for the ability to make you feel comfortable...and this makes Tribes a destination,” he says.

“I interviewed over 20 individuals for the GM’s position but I picked Majdi not based only on what he could do operationally... it was about an inner quality that we needed here to produce the atmosphere.”

### People power

The “people” Van Jaarsveld refers to is a team of 62 members of staff at Tribes, all hand-picked from African tribes including Xosa, Nguni, Twareq, Shona, Luhya and Kikuyu.

“These people still hold on to the codes of conduct of the tribe, and yet they live in the modern world,” explains Ibrahim. “So we celebrated the juxtaposition of the modern world meeting and joining very harmoniously with the traditional tribal world.”

Van Jaarsveld continues: “The natural culture within the African continent creates a very exciting, music-oriented, celebratory type of personality all over Africa. When you give them a little bit of freedom to express themselves these passionate people can change your experience completely — and I



Head of UAE operations Joe Van Jaarsveld.



*“It’s been unprecedented the amount of interest we’ve had in one brand in such a short time”*



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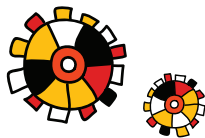
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## Cover story

Tribes



think that is what comes across here. We've given them the latitude to express themselves".

Throughout training, staff were educated on FoodFund's "superlative service standards" but also encouraged to be themselves, asserts Ibrahim.

"We hired you because of your great personality, your enigmatic personality, so don't you shy away from that, bring it out every day," she says.

The result of this approach at FoodFund International is a "negligible" level of staff turnover, says Van Jaarsveld.

"I've been in F&B for 16 years, for the first time I've seen senior managers who are good listeners," says Romdhani.

FoodFund International commercial manager Rob de Villiers explains that this is part of the company's overriding management philosophy. When Tribes was being reinvented for Dubai, he says there was no hierarchy in the development team: "Everybody had an area of accountability and responsibility and what's happened is each individual within the team post-opening has held onto that accountability and responsibility on a continued basis".

"It cascades down through this company," says Van Jaarsveld. "FoodFund International in the Middle East has created a work environment where every individual has a voice.

"I've been in this business 36 years, I've never worked in a company where everybody's opinion is important. That doesn't



The GM of Tribes Mall of the Emirates with his winning management team: from left, Ilham Faris, guest relations manager; head chef Prabakaran Manickam; GM Majdi Romdhani; and floor manager Siphon Ndebele.

mean your idea is necessarily taken and worked with, it means that you have a voice. The personalities and the egos disappear and we drill down to what is important; it's the decision making on a business basis," he adds.



FoodFund International commercial manager Rob de Villiers.

*"As far as Dubai is concerned I think this will be the one and only Tribes"*

### The next step

Going forward, the company is keen to retain the exclusivity of the brand.

"We don't see a Tribes in every mall in Dubai," says De Villiers. "As far as Dubai is concerned, there will only be one Tribes, What we do see is a Tribes in the major cities in the region."

He said Tribes had exceeded revenue expectations, but to maintain its "integrity", slow growth was necessary.

Van Jaarsveld reveals: "We have been inundated with interest from around the world from prospective partners ... it's been unprecedented the amount of interest we've had in one brand in such a short time. It's been mind-boggling.

"We will carefully monitor the pace of growth and the areas of opportunity," he adds.

When it comes to where new

outlets will be located, the talkative team becomes quiet, although De Villiers says there are plans for the next Tribes restaurants to have liquor licences.

He also hints that there could be a fourth, or fifth brand to enter the FoodFund International stable in the Middle East.

"We've developed two distinct areas under new business development — one that is existing brands, The Meat Co. Tribes, Ribs and Rumps — and we've launched an area that will fall under a venture capital banner where the development of new brands takes place," says De Villiers, adding that the firm would also consider taking on management contracts.

If a new brand follows, and when Tribes opens its second outlet in the UAE, one thing is certain: they will be led by a company dedicated to offering tasty food in a fun setting. What more could you ask for? ●

