

20 Questions with Nik Rollison

Nik Rollison is a Food & Beverage Executive with CONCRETESEED Concepts & Hospitality Projects.

Interview: Christopher Holder

All successful hospitality operators know this instinctively: you need to bring all the components of a venue together. The food, service, look and feel, the online and social presence... there's lots to consider.

Some operators don't get it. Some operators don't think about the uniforms, the lighting, the menu design. My food's great, why do I need the bathrooms to be clean? People are here to eat. Hang on, it's all part of the experience.

I'm originally from the US. Prior to moving to Australia, I was Director of Restaurant Operations for Aria Resort & Casino — a 4004-room hotel in Vegas.

I was in the pre-opening team that helped develop all the F&B concepts, hired in all the chefs, managers and staff and brought that venue to life.

Vegas might be at the pinnacle of hospitality operations but the discipline of running a successful venue — bar, club, restaurant, whatever it is — is the same. If you have a 10-seat restaurant or a 1000-seat restaurant it's not like you have a bunch of different work to do. It's the same work, just more of it, and you have more people in supporting roles.

Saying that, we launched Aria in the middle of the GFC. MGM's joint venture partner Dubai World pulled a lot of money from the project.

It meant we couldn't afford a training and development team. My team had to onboard all the staff — literally fill out all the paper work, photocopy the IDs, and do the training. There were 3400 staff to induct in not much more than a week.

What that experience taught me was the importance of the knowledge — the crucial messaging about who you are as a venue and how you go about your business — trickling down all the way from your key lieutenants right through to the bottle washers.

After launching Aria I was approached by a group saying they were relaunching a casino in Australia called Star City. So I packed up my wife and two dogs and moved to Sydney.

I was General Manager of F&B and helped develop and conceptualise all the restaurants and bars of what is now The Star. It was a similar sce-

nario to Aria. We brought in the management, all-new chefs, and worked up the standard operating procedure, masterminding the guest experience for each of those venues.

Whether it's The Star or Las Vegas, we all want to catch that shooting star, the guy or gal who's on the rise but not quite hit the big time. You want to launch something new and have a point of difference others can only aspire to.

Case in point for The Star launch was Momofuku. Very few people in the world let alone in Sydney had heard of David Chang. New York had, but no one else — he hadn't made a splash yet. So to land David and open a Momofuku, with a name most people couldn't pronounce, with a restaurant model that's not the norm in this country, and a model that's actually downright offensive to some people in this country — can't make a booking, can't phone a number, playing loud rock 'n' roll music, hats on backwards, and if you don't like it you can f**k off! — well, that wasn't the status quo in 2011.

Now every cool restaurant in Sydney has the same sort of model.

I think it took about two years for Sydneysiders to accept that The Star had a good F&B platform. It took a few years in a row of getting three hats at Momofuku, one hat at Black, Soko, Balla; a Nightclub of the Year, Hottest New Restaurant of the Year — it took all of those accolades for people to concede, 'well, 'spose it must be okay!'

After launching The Star and while working as COO of pub group C.Inc [Coogee Bay Hotel, Cruise Bar, formerly The Bourbon] that Paul Kelly [Paul Kelly Design] and I put our heads together and dreamed up Concreteseed.

Is Concreteseed of its time? I think so. Certainly the demand is growing. Some 10 or 15 years ago, smaller calibre operators or restaurateurs thought that if they spent the money on the design and fitout then, ergo, they had a good venue. They didn't weigh heavily enough the influence of impeccable service, great ambience, great food, the overall guest experience — these 'whole package' components weren't taken into account.

Concreteseed highlights areas operators need to focus on and then we can provide that content: we can do training, we can do branding, we can do the onboarding of staff, we can launch your venue. Or you might have it all together and you need a perspective — hey, maybe you should tweak this or that. We can do that too. That's our specialty: we bring venue concepts to life. venue

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