

Restaurant & Catering

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Double take

MoVida's Frank Camorra and Andy McMahon explain how they make their partnership work



“The only way to make money is to make the customers come back”

Wisdom from Leo Schadegg, Alphüte Restaurant, Adelaide

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Two



of a kind

Business partners Frank Camorra and Andy McMahon have an innovative approach when running their successful MoVida restaurants.
By Kerryn Ramsey

When Frank Camorra arrived at a job interview at the Carron Tavern in West Melbourne back in 2001, there was undoubtedly a meeting of the minds with the employer and front-of-house, Andy McMahon. The hotel's cuisine was "caught in a time warp", recalls McMahon, and he was searching for an up-and-coming chef who could produce a new contemporary menu.

The timing was right for Camorra who had just returned from a Spanish vacation with his wife. "It was just one of those chance things that worked really well," says McMahon.

For five years prior to this, Camorra had been working part-time at various restaurants in Geelong while studying architecture at Deakin University. He then made the move to Melbourne and began working full-time as an apprentice, then head chef, for Guy Grossi's restaurants. "I'd gained a love of the industry during those years," recalls this Barcelona-born chef.

Torn between the two professions, Camorra decided to take a year's sabbatical and returned to Spain to contemplate his future. Entranced by the country's vibrant culture and revolutionary cuisine, he saw the vision of bringing these elements into Australia.

With his partner Vanessa on board, Camorra took over the kitchen lease at the Carron in 2001, working with McMahon and his cousin Mykal Bartholomew (who later moved on to open Coda and Tonka). McMahon recalls he was a little dubious about Camorra's cuisine choice. "I don't think I'd ever been to a Spanish restaurant in my life but Frank assured

us—with his credentials and his passion for his heritage and the food—that he would do a great job."

Camorra had such conviction, McMahon even agreed to rename the establishment to MoVida at the Carron. It was clear that these business partners had different skills but knew how to bring out the best in each other.

"Frank was a chef who was happy to put in 80 hours a week. It was a head-down, bum-up work ethic that he still has to this day," says McMahon. "We complement each other with different skill sets. I'm probably a bit more jovial and more of a people person. I suppose that's what Frank was looking for in a business partner—someone to be out the front while he was strumming away down the back."

"I don't think I'd ever been to a Spanish restaurant in my life but Frank assured us with his credentials and his passion for his heritage and the food that he would do a great job."

Andy McMahon, MoVida co-owner

Camorra also appreciated McMahon's interesting background—he had been around the hospitality industry all his life. As a child, he grew up above the Laurel Hotel in Ascot Vale which was owned and run by his grandmother and later his father. McMahon recalls that Granny "couldn't cook to save herself but she knew how to run a pub!"

As the word got out about the MoVida restaurant, Melburnians were enamoured with Camorra's Spanish fare—a modern take on tapas and raciones as well as signature dishes. "There were a lot of Italian restaurants around but there weren't many Spanish ones," says Camorra, who grew up in Barcelona and Andalucia until his family migrated to Melbourne when he was just five years old.

By the time the Carron lease ended in 2003, the business partners were ready to go bigger and better, opening the



MoVida Next Door creates an authentic tapas experience.

graffiti-encased MoVida Bar de Tapas on Melbourne's Hosier Lane.

Here, Camorra's vision finally came to fruition, drawing inspiration from the 'MoVida' youth movement in Spain after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. Artists, musicians, authors and filmmakers could finally express themselves freely, and this colourful history has been a stimulus for the passionate chef.

It wasn't long before the dynamic duo were turning away diners due to massive waiting lists. As soon as a nearby property became available, they signed the lease and opened the aptly named MoVida Next Door.

"Not in our wildest dreams did we ever think we would have expanded to this point," says McMahon, who then took the bull by the horn with a raft of new openings. This included MoVida's Aquí, Paco's Tacos and Bakery in Melbourne, the Bar Pulpo at Melbourne Airport, and finally the crowning glory—MoVida Sydney which opened last October.

"It had always been an ambition of ours," says McMahon. "For the past five years, we had looked at properties that came up but nothing hit the mark. This one was the right time, right property, right landlord, and we had good key staff members. They were willing to

make the move and do something new with their lives. All the stars aligned and we finally pulled the trigger."

During the set-up time, Camorra and McMahon rented a Sydney apartment for six months. "It was crazy because I flew back each weekend to be with my family," recalls Camorra. Fortunately, they were able to bring along trusted Melburnian staff members to run the Sydney operation. Head chef James Campbell and front-of-house manager Andy Jacoora, who had been working for MoVida from the get-go, plus two sous chefs, all relocated to manage the new establishment.

"It's comforting to know that these guys understand the ethos of MoVida,"

"Frank was a chef who was happy to put in 80 hours a week. It was a head-down, bum-up work ethic that he still has to this day."

Andy McMahon, co-owner of MoVida

says McMahon. "They're our best mates. It's secure and in good hands. It made it a lot easier to come back to Melbourne knowing it was going to be looked after like it's their own."

Treating staff as 'family members' is a key element to the success of the MoVida business. "A lot of our staff have been with us for a very long time," explains Camorra.

So, what's the secret ingredient that makes the chefs and wait staff stay? "We've tried to make it a fun environment—if you work your bum off, you get rewarded," explains McMahon. "People have responded to that and stayed around a lot longer than you would find in some other venues in town."

Camorra agrees: "When they've worked with us for so long, they become very close friends."

A sense of independence is another reason for longevity. "We encourage [staff] to make their own decisions; we don't micromanage the guys," says McMahon. "They are in a position for a reason and you have to back their decisions. We're always there to help but I don't like to jump down people's throats if it's unnecessary."

Camorra and McMahon are not scrimping when it comes to staff's salaries

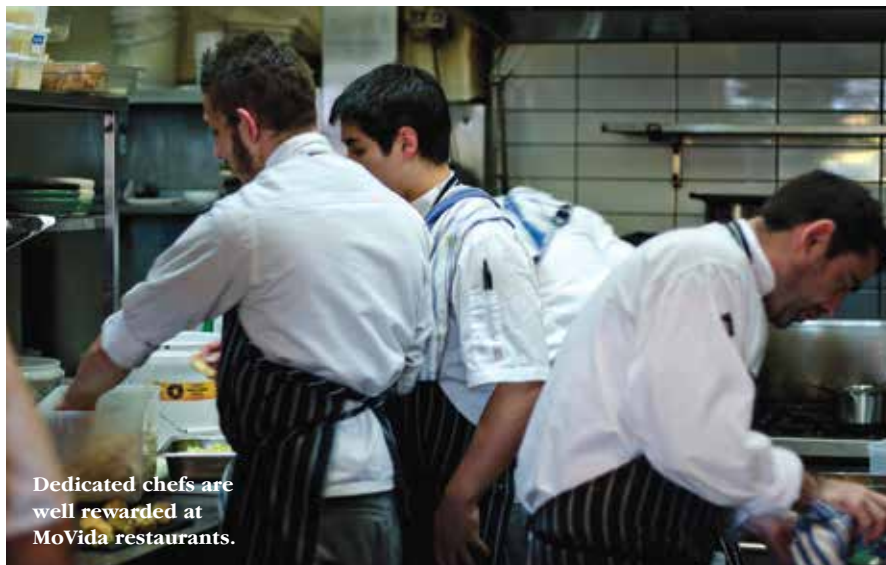


Quality Spanish cuisine is key for chef Frank Camorra.



MoVida co-owner Andy McMahon keeps the business ticking.

either. That includes head chef James Campbell who recently became a full partner. “We will hopefully be able to do that with other staff in the future,” says Camorra. McMahon continues: “We



Dedicated chefs are well rewarded at MoVida restaurants.

Andy McMahon’s top 4 management tips

1. Stick to what you’re good at.
2. Hire like-minded staff.
3. Reward staff members who are consistently doing the right thing by you.
4. Do social networking in-house. “We found it better to have somebody who had been in the business for a long time who understood what we were about.”

Frank Camorra’s top 4 tips when opening a restaurant

1. Find an architect who you have an affinity with [Camorra’s right-hand man and former uni buddy is architect Adam Dettrick who’s designed most of the MoVida restaurants.]
2. Treat the bar as a centrepiece. “Our bars are not just designed for people to go and have a drink—they’re designed for people to eat and sit comfortably and interact with each other and the staff.”
3. Incorporate an open kitchen. “It adds a lot to the atmosphere. Without going overboard, we want people to share some of the theatre that happens in the kitchen and the background.
4. Spend two weeks with all staff in place before opening the doors to the general public.

remunerate them well; we pay by the hour. With a couple of exceptions of guys on salaries, we’re fair with what we pay people and what we ask back from them.”

There are also a few ‘carrots’ that chefs can’t resist, particularly the tour to Spain each year—“for a bit of research and a bit of fun”, explains Camorra. Last year, the team drove from Valencia to San Sebastian and Barcelona. “You do end up putting on four or five kilos every trip but it’s worth it,” says McMahon, laughing.

Even during these journeys, Camorra always manages to mix pleasure with work. His travel research has been converted into four Spanish-inspired cookbooks with food writer Richard Cornish, as well as the travel tome, *MoVida’s Guide To Barcelona*.

Camorra and Cornish are presently

compiling a book on southern Spain that will go on sale later next year.

If that’s not enough, Camorra is also about to embark on his third travel tour to Spain with MPT Worldwide Journeys, showing his favourite haunts to MoVida devotees during September and October.

During this time, McMahon will be overseeing their latest venture—a MoVida hole-in-the-wall at Virgin’s domestic terminal in Sydney. “It’s a not-so-overly complicated version of MoVida—the same quality ingredients and a lot of the classic dishes,” explains Camorra.

Although it’s a busy few months ahead, these two entrepreneurs aren’t even phased about opening their new food eatery. As Camorras points out, “If you’ve done it a few times in the past, it gets a little bit better each subsequent time.” ○