

# Restaurant & Catering

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## Getting personal

David Bitton  
explains how  
you can build a  
merchandising  
empire from  
your restaurant

**“The whole time we’ve stayed true to our food. That will never change. The dishes we introduced 50 years ago still taste the same.”**

Wisdom from Lance Wong,  
The Malaya, Sydney

■ Best practice in commercial kitchen design, page 13 ■ The business of dessert, page 25 ■ Bring da noise (then muffle it), page 46 ■ Everything you ever wanted to know about stemware, page 48 ■ Getting digital with your Association, page 8

# BotTLing it up

*With his cafe and gourmet foods going from strength to strength, David Bitton is now happy to help restaurateurs produce their own personal products. By Kerryn Ramsey*

**W**hen chef/restaurateur David Bitton developed his first range of boutique food products, he had the dream of seeing them on display at stores around the world. And all this came to fruition—much earlier than he expected. In fact, his monkey nut chutney, chilli garlic masala and the rest of his collection appeared at UK's Selfridges and Hong Kong's ParknShop stores before they were available at any Australian grocery or department stores.

"We started exporting before we positioned ourselves nationally," explains David who's also been running Bitton Café and Bistro in Sydney's inner-west suburb of Alexandria for the past 13 years. "David Jones, for instance, was very slow to take us on board but now our range is available there, as well as at Harris Farm, Thomas Dux and many good delis."

When expanding his business overseas, French-born David turned to the Australian Trade Commission (Austrade), which gave him guidance on export strategies and marketing

techniques. It was a handy tool, especially when he targeted New Zealand. "They're not always a fan of Australian products and I can tell you they are not fans of French products because of a couple of things that happened in the late '80s," he says, referring to Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior ship that was sunk in New Zealand by the French in 1985. "We still managed to break in about 20 stores there because the product is good.

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Although we never had great volume, pure strategy positioning worked."

At this stage, wheeling and dealing in any country was hardly an issue for this charismatic Frenchman. With his wife and business partner Sohani at the helm, David has an international

approach to both home and work.

"My wife is South African/Indian, my grandfather is Moroccan, my grandmother is Turkish, my dad is from Lyon in France, my mum is from the Champagne region, so it was a really big mixed family," he explains. "What we decided was to create a range of gourmet food products that represent our background, our culture, what we grew up with. That's how our range really started, from our grandparents'

recipes and, being a chef, I twisted and tweaked it."

David's passion for creative cooking came when he was just 15 years old, spending several years refining his craft at such grand dining establishments as the InterContinental Carlton Cannes Hotel in the south of France. After meeting a group of Australians working in

Switzerland, and hearing of the beauty of our country, David eventually quit his job and headed to Sydney. "I landed here when I was 22 with two suitcases and \$1000 in my pocket."

Utilising his skill as a hotel restaurant chef, he started working at the



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InterContinental Sydney, where he met his future wife, Sohani. From 1992, he combined work and travel, cooking at the Ritz-Carlton in Sydney, Hayman Island at the Great Barrier Reef, Windsor Hotel in Melbourne, and Sheraton On The Park's Gekko in Sydney. After working there for five years, he was headhunted to open the first fine dining restaurant, Starfish, at The Entertainment Quarter (known as Fox Studio back then) in 1999.

But for David and Sohani, who specialises in business development and management in the hospitality and tourism industry, they eventually decided to leave the corporate life and start their own venture. They opened a six-table coffee shop in the once-industrial backlot of Alexandria.

"Prior to this, we were earning \$300,000 in our wages combined, with no mortgage and no children, but the first week's turnover in our new business was \$824," recalls David. "We started panicking a little, wondering if we had made a mistake. But we decided to give it a go and put our heads down. We knew we could cook, we knew we could sell. Today, we serve over 2000 meals a week."

So successful, the couple expanded the business in 2007, taking over the

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two shops next door. The cafe now also accommodates a private dining room, a kids' terrace, a bread section and a small fruit-and-veg grocery shop. "We are licensed, have parking and wifi—all today's needs are there," says Sohani.

As the suburb became gentrified, local businesspeople, uni students and yummy mummies were flocking to the expanded cafe, but David noticed that the product range was lagging a little. So, to celebrate the 10th birthday of the cafe in 2010, David gave the products a facelift—smaller sizes with a new font and a "more people-friendly, not corporate" rebrand. He also launched his self-published cookbook, *The Bitton Book*, which soon became the catalyst for the couple's new venture,

Bitton Consulting. More than 60,000 copies were already pre-sold, so David and Sohani realised their bespoke approach was a real money earner.

While they have no fear tackling uncharted territories, from publishing cookbooks to producing food items, they realised that other restaurateurs—those who would like

to release their own wares—don't have the time to take on projects like this. So the couple opened their own consultancy company, bringing in sales and marketing director Camilla Gill and finance manager Lena D'Albora, to develop food-related products from first concept to launch. "We've already made all the mistakes so a restaurant owner can avoid any of these problems," says Sohani, whose team manages everything from product development to online shopping.

"A lot of people put their name on a jar but don't know what to do next. We advise people on how to position your brand strategically, and how to support the brand," says David, whose portfolio includes product development



Inside and outside Bitton in Sydney—the deli display and cafe (opposite), and the alfresco dining tables.

and business consultancy to many food businesses. “There needs to be an emotional connection to the product that we pass on to the consumer. When you tell a story to a consumer, they love it, buy your product and never look back.”

When it comes to digital media, David was an early enthusiast, creating a database for regular customers when the cafe started. “I didn’t have to buy any mailing lists or any marketing to get this database,” he explains. “Our newsletter emails, for example, go to 6000 people who are directly connected to Bitton. When we do an email about a special function, it’s fully booked and paid for within 24 hours. You can’t buy that.”

Another business opportunity that David has been championing for many years is food alliances. “Doing a gift box with Maggie Beer, Charmaine Solomon or Tetsuya’s is a great way to position your name and your brand,” he explains. He notes that while running a restaurant or cafe is tough, selling merchandise improves the business. And every time the Bitton barbecue sauce or caramelised orange and chilli balsamic dressing appears at a dinner party or barbie, it’s much more than a taste treat—it works as an effective marketing tool all around the world. ○

## Top 5 product tips

Chef/entrepreneur David Bitton admits that “we made every mistake we could have done” when first developing his food products. His original sauce bottle, for instance, was designed with a stylish paper label that wouldn’t hold properly when stored in the fridge. “You couldn’t even read the name on the label,” he says, laughing.

He decided to revamp the Bitton design to give it more character, rather than the previous corporate look. “When you change the label, you change your branding, change your website, your stationery, your menus... Everything changes so it is a very costly exercise.”

Here are Bitton’s five handy tips when developing a product...

- 1. Refine the concept.** “Figure out what you want to achieve with your brand and your product.” Draw inspiration from local and international food and packaging trends and think about your market and various sales platforms. “In an industry that is saturated with gourmet brands, you need to stand out,” says Bitton.
- 2. Hire people with specific expertise.** “Don’t think that because you’re a chef you can do it—it’s a different platform in terms of manufacturing. For instance, don’t make five jars, make 400 jars. You need the skill to transfer your small recipe to a bigger platform.”
- 3. Patience is a virtue.** “Don’t think you’re going to put your name on a jar and make a fortune in a year or so. It doesn’t work like that. For example, David Jones has 4000 different brands of products, so they are tired of getting a new shelf brand.”
- 4. Become a networker.** “I network with everyone who comes into the cafe. I also joined the global Entrepreneurs’ Organization. You can join by invitation only and you learn from people’s experiences in the business world.”
- 5. Be prepared to take risks.** “Everything I learn is fascinating and I’m willing to take on new challenges. And I’m not afraid to learn from my mistakes.” ○