

Sharing the love

With eight restaurants under its belt, Enoteca Group is a Hong Kong success story. Co-founder Kim Minards tells Carolynne Dear how small plates mean big business

When the sun's shining, not much makes me smile more than a sunny terrace, a nice crisp glass of something cold and a sharing plate or two. And in an area of the world fraught with excessive rents, limited outdoor space and strict al fresco licensing, restaurant group Enoteca has done well to achieve this happy hat-trick in many of its venues.

And so on a sunny morning I find myself in Sai Kung enjoying a flat white with Enoteca co-founder Kim Minards chatting about the group's latest acquisition.

A sociology graduate, she arrived in the territory as a backpacker 22 years ago but these days co-helms the expanding restaurant group as well as being mum to children Jack, 8, and Summer, 6.

"I'm British but moved to South Africa when I was 7, so I guess I enjoyed a sort of expat upbringing. After university I packed my rucksack, hit the road, and when I ran out of money, pitched up in Hong Kong."

Pre-handover, there were no working visa restrictions for British passport holders and Minards found herself managing Stauntons in SoHo, which was where she met her husband and business partner, Rob Cooper, who was managing the (now-defunct) restaurant Bayou.

"SoHo was different then, in that there weren't so many high street restaurants, it was more hotel dining," she says. "When we opened our first restaurant, Enoteca, we wanted to serve good quality wine by the glass, as there seemed to be a bit of a gap in the market. We opened with 32 different wines and sharing plates of Spanish tapas-style food and it was an instant hit."

Despite the success, Minards admits to several sleepless nights. "Oh my god, the rent! Back then we were being charged \$68,000 per month and we didn't know if things would take off, so yes, I did lose sleep over it," she laughs. Today, the rent has sky-rocketed to more than four times that amount, but despite this, she's sleeping better.

"These days not much keeps me up at night. Fortunately the restaurants worked out" -



Enoteca founders Rob Cooper and Kim Minards



Left: Minards in 1975 growing up in South Africa. Above: Minards backpacking in Pakistan



Iberico, Shelley Street



Enoteca on Elgin was swiftly followed locally by The Phoenix, Bacau, Cicada, Iberico and an Enoteca in Quarry Bay - "But to be honest, I wouldn't open another venue in SoHo now, I don't think the rents are worth it. Even Sheung Wan and Sai Ying Pun don't convince me."

Instead, Minards attention has turned north to Sai Kung. Last summer the pair opened The Conservatory to great local acclaim, and have just announced they will be taking over local stalwart, Steamers.

"It's a totally different market up here," she admits. "The expat market is strong, and seems increasingly so with all the new schools opening."

Locals themselves (they moved to Clearwater Bay five years ago) Minards says they are still viewed as 'newbies' by the local expat population. "There are a lot of old-timers up here," she says. "We really wanted to respect the fact that they have been using Steamers for many years. Originally we wanted to re-open as The Botanist, as it sort of tied in with The Conservatory vibe, but we've since changed our minds. We don't want this to become a hipster gastro-pub, it's always been a down-to-earth 'cold beer and pub grub' kind of place."

It turns out the Yi Chun Street building used to be a theatre in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, but opened as Steamers in 2008 when the pub moved over the road from Sai Kung's infamous 'square'. Mid-twentieth century photos show a venue on the watersedge - subsequent reclamation now puts it around 500 metres from

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the Sai Kung waterfront. To better reflect the building's heritage, they have decided to call their new spot The Picture House.

Minards explains they're sticking with the British pub feel, but are completely gutting and updating the interior. On the day I met with her, the builders have just gone in. The venue comes with an outdoor licence and a terrace area, adding an all-important pub garden.

"We're keeping the pub theme, but lightening up the interiors," she says. "We won't be serving tapas or sharing plates, it will be proper pub food with a roast on weekends."

The Conservatory, rented from the owners of Big Fish two doors away and previously operating as western-style bistro Grande Restaurant, was given a clean sweep of paint before it opened last summer. Portuguese-style tiles were laid on the floor and beautiful swathes of leaf-green wallpaper fixed to the far wall. It's light and airy and also benefits from an outdoor seating licence.

"Yes, it's worked really well," Minards smiles. "Again, we're the newbies up here, but



Yi Chun Street building was originally a theatre

Photograph courtesy of The University of Hong Kong Libraries



At her first waitressing job in SoHo



Cicada, Elgin Street



I do think Sai Kung was ready for something a bit more grown up." It does a roaring trade in Enoteca-style tapas sharing plates and platters and quality wines by the glass for lunch and dinner and the brunch trade has also been brisk. Of course all sittings are complemented by kids menus.

"Seriously, you'd be mad in a place like Sai Kung not to offer children's food," she says. The Conservatory is situated on Sai Kung's 'square', enclosed on two sides by casual dining venues and with a children's play area in the far corner.

Minards also admits to recently hiring somebody to manage their social media. "Facebook comments can be harsh," she says. "We've seen neighbouring venues really suffer from negative comments on local groups" (Sai Kung is home to the notorious, no-holds-barred, Sai Kung Dirty Laundry Facebook group) "frustratingly these experiences are often not

followed up with diners actually approaching the management. If they did, we could do something to rectify the problem. When we first opened The Conservatory, we were fastidious about having either myself or Rob around all of the time to efficiently mop up any problems and receive customer feedback. We couldn't afford to let the ball drop for a minute."

Locals are faithful in their followings, as Minards has noted. Jaspas has been operating for over 20 years in the square and is seen as something of a benchmark.

"It can be intimidating, but I think we've proved ourselves with The Conservatory.

"We've also been lucky in that we've retained a lot of our staff over the years, which helps us with a continuous, quality service," Minards continues. "The children have grown up with them. When Jack was tiny he used to come to work with me in SoHo all the time, and the girls used to whisk him out for lunch and dinner. I really enjoy staff training. In the old days it was all British backpackers, but now we hire more Filipinos, Nepalese and Chinese. I also work closely with the chefs. Do I have a favourite venue? I think The Conservatory, I love the decor, although I tend to move around a lot. Iberico recently opened in Yuen Long and sometimes I go up there for a buffet lunch. I also like the Asian vibe at Cicada - when we were forced to close a few years ago (the building on Cochrane Street was being renovated into apartments) locals asked us to bring it back, so we re-opened on Elgin Street. It's funny, it turned

out it was a real favourite locally, but people hadn't made the connection that we also owned other venues."

It seems Hong Kongers are a loyal lot. Here's hoping The Picture House will make the grade. **sk**



Goodbye Steamers, hello Enoteca Group - Sai Kung's newest eatery opens on October 1