

# THE FUTURE STARTS HERE

It's been a long time coming but Alex Kratena and Monica Berg are back in the bar game. Finally, they can reveal their plans – **Hamish Smith** has the exclusive

**T**he question of Alex Kratena and Monica Berg's future took three years to answer. For Kratena the clock was running the moment he gave his notice at Artesian in 2015 – the day the Langham Hotel bar won The World's 50 Best Bars for the fourth year straight, and then faced the impossible task of replacing its 11-strong bar team. The walk out of Kratena and his partner in crimes against tradition, Simone Caporale, and the speed at which Artesian plummeted in our estimations sent tremors through the hotel bar landscape. One-month notice periods are increasingly a thing of the past.

By this time Monica Berg, Norway's most famous bartending export, was in the wings, having moved to London to be with Kratena in 2013. She found a role managing Pollen Street Social, one of Jason Atherton's Michelin venues, then in 2015 commuted across the North Sea to oversee Himkok in Oslo – one of the most forward-thinking bars in the world. So the famed duo of Alex and Simone had become a trio – the Super Group of the bar industry if you will – and demand for their services was feverish. Their consultancy business expanded exponentially and busy lives were kept busier by the launch of their global educational platform and charity P(our).

But a world tour eventually needs new music. They are bartenders after all – no number of inspirational trips to the Amazon rainforest could distract from the central question: what about the bar? Kratena would tease with cryptic descriptions: "Is it a bar? No, it's not a bar. Is it a workshop? No, it's not a workshop. Is it a lab? No, it's not a lab." And indeed, as you're about to find out, it's none of those things in isolation and all of them at once.

The one thing they couldn't have known was that Caporale would step aside from the bar project. The demand of the trio's consultancy company, coupled with an unreliable back, which makes full-time bartending unwise, has meant Caporale now heads up the group's consultancy work in Asia.

The bar project was cursed by bad luck, yet Kratena and Berg were blessed with time to hone their plans. While no grandstanding concept, in funding, collaboration, design, drinks or staffing policy, there is a quiet revolution in the detail of their venue. It will be close to three-and-a-half years from plan to execution by the time they open their Old Street site in early spring and they can't wait. Kratena and Berg have yearned to get back in service, to put away their passports and be bartenders again.





## THE BARS (YES, PLURAL)

It was never going to be as simple as just one bar. Kratena and Berg's site is on Old Street in east London, a redevelopment of an old post office comprising three spaces - two bars and a studio. "The bars are called Elementary and Tayēr - distinct brands that sit alongside each other," says Kratena. Elementary will be visible from the street through floor-to-ceiling windows - and will open up into a more casual space, with walk-ins from as early as 11.30am. It'll serve coffee and snacks, seasonal cocktails on tap, beer and wine.

If such a casual, volume-oriented bar wasn't what you expected from the pair, Tayēr is the more abstract, indefinable space we might have imagined. "It means workshop in Spanish," says Kratena. "Here we will have total freedom to evolve as it has no fixed concept - an always changing space," he says. At Tayēr you can expect there to be more focus on what's inside the glass and on the plate, with more experienced bartenders holding court. At its rear will be the studio Outthink, a lab, workspace and private hire venue, which will open up on busy nights.

## LIQUIDS AND SOLIDS

"It's not a cocktail bar, it's a bar," says Berg, with the defiance of someone who doesn't like pigeons, let alone their holes. That means that while there will be cocktails, there isn't a liquid hierarchy. "Sometimes you just want a shot and a lager," says Kratena. "If we sell it, it's because we're proud to." The focus in Elementary will be fast, accessible and affordable. "What if going to the bar is like going to the pub? Somewhere you can lower your shoulders," says Berg. Wine, beer and bottomless coffee will be served alongside bottled cocktails and tap-tails which will start at around £7.50. These are no ordinary taps - Berg has collaborated with specialist Taptails to bring a bespoke solution, in which carbonation and temperature can be controlled for every cocktail that passes through its pipes.

Seasonal, sustainable produce will be the foundation of everything they do at the venue, and in Elementary, ingredients used in cocktails will ebb and flow with farmers' harvests.

"We have created a seasonal calendar, which will be a feature of the design," says Kratena. "Within each season we will concentrate on 20 categories, such as berries, stalks, seeds, grain and flowers - it's what grows in the UK." Berg, who is passionate about supporting farmers, says the bar will be able to be

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nimble, reactive and hyper-local. "If a supplier has 10kg of plums from Kent, we will be able to put a drink on the menu for a few days. One of the biggest problems for small farmers and producers is that they find it hard to sell in such small amounts. It's also a privilege to work with products at the peak of their condition."

Tayēr will likely be the bar that gets the column inches, even if most people will be happy enough propping the bar up in Elementary. Here there will be less structure and no boundaries, focused on bringing to life seasonality through small plates and refined cocktails (starting at £11). But don't expect Artesian 2.0, says Kratena, pointing towards a scaled-back approach to presentation. Do expect the gamut of drinks-making processes to be employed in their creation. "It might have been rotavaped with unicorns but we will not tell you unless you want to know," says Berg. "Our drinks will be driven by flavour - that's all you need to know." So what kind of drinks - heavy, light? "Complex but light," says Kratena. "It's very easy to throw together a lot of heavy ingredients to achieve complexity, but it's very difficult to achieve complexity with light flavours." "A lot of work has gone into perfecting balance," says Berg. "We go into depth on acidity and sweetness."

But whatever the processes behind each drink, they won't impact service. "We have taken the creative work completely out of operations," says Kratena. "When you are in operations you are there for the guests."

Above all, there is no creator - drinks will be a collaboration between all staff, from bartenders to chefs. "If you want to be recognised as the best bartender in the world, this is not the place for you," says Berg. "Here it will be about the team."

Food, often an afterthought in bars, will be integral to the offering. The kitchen will be headed up by Zijun Meng and Ana Gonçalves, the husband and wife team who trained under Portuguese chef Nuno Mendes and have become names in the foodie scene through their pop up TA TA EATERY.

They will produce small plates of modern Asian food, designed to partner drinks, incorporating European ingredients and restaurant techniques. One dish already has a cult following: the Iberian Katsu Sandwich - a brioche toast sandwich of deep-fried, slow-cooked Iberian pork neck served with Asian slaw.



## COLLABORATION

If there is one word that comes up over and over, it is collaboration. “We have a lot of people present in our work,” says Berg. “Our designer worked on everything from logo to the colour of our aprons. We have a videographer too. They don’t work full time but are part of the business.” Though there’s a group of creatives with skin in the game, Kratena and Berg are majority shareholders in their venue. “We fought for a long time to make sure we retained the majority share – taking this scenic route to opening a bar has been an uphill struggle.”

For Kratena, it was important to put their money where their mouths are – not just put their names to a bar. “We wanted to be invested, otherwise we could have just been creative directors somewhere else. At the same time we wanted investors who could drive the business through advice and mentoring. We know very little about running a bar but we are happy to learn.”

That has meant evolving their skills. “We were super-involved in every area,” says Kratena. The pair enlisted Edit! Architects from Prague to work alongside them, along with Kratena’s friend Maxim Velcovský, a famous Czech designer. “The design was a collaboration between all of us. The brief was beauty by restraint – I probably stole that line from a book. So minimalism, functionalism and punk.” The end result is just that – a meeting of humble materials, concrete, wood and metal.

The furniture did not escape their attention either. “We spent weekends biking around London, testing bar stools,” says Berg. And where does the rotovap and all the other equipment live? “It’s

designed into the furniture,” says Kratena. “We have all the equipment a bartender could want and it’s all out of sight.” But one of their biggest challenges was designing the toilets. “We had the bathroom of our dreams then realised we were breaking every regulation. It wasn’t inclusive enough. Everything is unisex now – and communal.”

They have created partnerships, not buyer-seller relationships. For their cocktail taps they worked with Taptails, which is at the forefront of draught cocktails. With Behind Bars they designed their own ergonomic, hexagonally-organised stations, which will later be commercially available. Win-win for both parties.

## THE HUSTLE

To get here required patience – and hustle.

“Everyone told us ‘with your names investors will throw money at you,’” says Kratena. “We had approaches but there are a lot of sharks. We went through so many venues – we’re on our 11th. We dropped sites because of the landlords or we were dropped, but they were all very close to us signing. When the previous venue fell through, it was heartbreaking. I’ve never crashed so many times in my life. At one point we wanted to just get lost in the jungle – go to the Amazon for two or three months to forget about it. In the end it took three years to sign on a site – but in cities like London, you realise it’s normal. Every time we thought it was done, it wasn’t.” And even lucky number 11 went to a licensing appeal – costing the pair more in legal fees.

All this work and stress but they didn’t

want to be the bartenders who announce something before it’s done. “We couldn’t talk about it to anyone – it’s difficult to stay relevant for three years while not talking about 90% of what you’re doing.”

Berg says the two have never worked harder. “We worked full-time on our projects but also had to find ways to make money to live and build a reserve to put into the business. Last year I took 120 individual flights.”

With so many parties involved throughout the process, the project was scrutinised to within an inch of its life. “It made it more mature and enabled us to deliver on half of the budget,” says Kratena. They got very used to doing two things: asking for a discount and asking friends for help. “We asked everyone for a discount – we had no shame. Going through the process was humbling but we received a lot of support from the London bar community. Matt Whiley let us do a tasting for our landlords downstairs at Scout. Alistair Burgess, JJ Goodman, Michael Sager, Marcis Dzelzainis, Xavier Padovan... there are so many people who gave us advice.” This is bigger than friends helping out. “We all have a responsibility to work together to promote London as the best drinking and bar destination in the world,” he says.

## PEOPLE

Sustainability isn’t just about products, it’s about people. “We are a business that takes care of people so why don’t we take care of our own people?” says Berg. Indeed, the push to be majority owner in the business wasn’t about greed, it was about having

the power to be progressive. That means diverse teams and flexible hours. “We want the ability to do what we believe in. If I say we want all of our staff to have a bonus, I want the power to do that.”


Recruitment will not be like it is in most other bars. “We have made a policy out of hiring gender-balanced, diverse teams,” says Kratena. “While you can’t enforce it 100%, it’s important to try. If you look at the statistics, gender balance and diverse teams are more productive and creative and deliver better-functioning organisations.

“We also went down a route of making our business certified to be a workplace for people with disabilities, but we met a lot of resistance because we’ll be selling alcohol.” But that’s not done – more efforts will be made once the venue is open and can showcase what they’re doing. “We want a workforce that comes from all different sides of life,” says Berg. “We can learn as much from our employees as they can from us.”

With a focus on simple serves – Highballs in particular – Elementary will not require experienced bartenders. “Just nice people,” says Kratena. As an all-day venue, it will also offer flexible, daytime working hours and across the venue roles will be fluid.

Hands-on training will be key to staff development. “If they’re working with sake, we’ll organise it so they make a batch at a brewery,” says Kratena. Indeed, one of their new recruits is already experiencing this policy. Bartender Greg Almeida has spent two months in Norway, training with chefs – Berg’s contacts.

And now, site secured, design finalised and recruitment underway, Berg and Kratena’s first London bar is on the home straight. Their future starts here. ☺



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