

# PUBtic

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Volume 6 No.01

**SOLD**



## PUB REAL ESTATE 2019

BREAKING  
NEW GROUND

### MIDDLETON



OF  
NOWHERE

### The House



Zagame Built

## Welcome to the house Zagame built



Melbourne pub industry royalty the Zagame Group is tapping the market for boutique accommodation with a stunning repositioning of its Lygon Street digs. Clyde Mooney reports

In 1971 Victor Zagame began a legacy by taking on the Albion Charles Hotel in Northcote, in Melbourne. The aim from the start was to facilitate families, offering great value in hospitality and atmosphere.

What has grown to become the Zagame Corporation today counts several arms, led by five successful pubs in the suburbs of Melbourne; Zagame's Ballarat, Berwick, Boronia, Caulfield and the Reservoir Hotel.

Each is a full-service pub, and all feature a signature inclusion, Kid's World, accommodating the definitive members of family patronage. Together the venues have racked up a string of Awards, most recently 2019 Australian Hotels Association

National Awards for Excellence, granted at Boronia for Best Family Dining, at Ballarat for Best TAB, and at Berwick for Chef of the Year in Chris Bonello.

The family has come to count other assets, such as a hotel and casino in Vanuatu, and a mid-sized accommodation hotel on Carlton's Lygon Street, which it has operated since 2003. This property, a former Downtowner Hotel, was a popular budget option for the area.

Recognising the ongoing transformation of the precinct and wider market trend toward unique experiences, it was determined to reposition the tired Downtowner into Melbourne's best boutique hotel.

In June 2019, following a thorough \$18 million transformation, the new 97-room boutique Zagame's House was unveiled.

"No expense has been spared in the transformation of this property," offer brother's Victor and Robert Zagame. "We invite our guests to experience for themselves the exquisite art, luxurious amenities and state-of-the-art technology. Expect the unexpected when it comes to exceptional service as our team will impress even the most experienced traveller."

Selected to oversee the new business was Adam Taloni – a veteran of decades serving hotel guests at operations of all sizes, bringing 22 years' experience and a clutch of awards for his work at the likes of Ovolo and Vanity Group. He had overseen the \$20 million renovation of Ovolo Woolloomooloo, awarded Hotel Management magazine's GM of the Year, before that Mantra Group's Peppers Hotel on the Gold Coast, following Peppers Broadbeach in 2010.

Prior to joining Zagame's Taloni had just returned from an extensive trip abroad, living for a time on the other side of the service counter and contemplating his next career move.

"That was my opportunity," he says. "I'd always thought 'Can I do anything outside of hotels ... Do I want to?' It turns out, no, I love my job and that's where I belong."



The Zagame Group is Taloni's third family company employer. He says the business the Group had at Carlton for many years largely drew the same people year-in, year-out, with little change or prospect for advancement. The new Zagame's House is quite a different fish, needing someone that can not only run the operation, but also know what is needed in branding and marketing to attract the clientele they want.



Adam Taloni

## The Plan

Across the country smaller, 'boutique' hotel offerings are in vogue and attracting more and more of the traditional hotel guest. Country and suburban pubs and sleeping hotels are benefitting from a desire for something closer to the lifestyle of the region than a replication of every other high-end room.

"I think people are tired of the stock-standard hotel experience," poses Taloni. "I've worked for them. Not much changes. You could go there ten years later and see half the same people, the rooms look the same, the menu's the same."

The rooms at Zagame's House are equipped with contemporary comforts melded with custom furnishings, seen in the king-sized beds and European pillows, donned in locally produced linen, integrated technology outlets, and acoustically panelled walls for optimum privacy and ambience. Fueng Shui Master Edgar Lok Tin Yung provided consultation throughout the hotel. Head designer Kas Makohon says the final product is aesthetic eye candy.

"From the bold, geometric detailing on the hotel's exterior, to the unexpected, psychedelic artworks that line the hallways, each time you go into a different part of a hotel a whole new sensory experience awaits."

The Zagame family saw their Carlton business as an opportunity to create something of which they were



personally proud. The team took two years to research the design and functionality, taking many trips interstate and overseas to some of the world's best boutique hotels to observe what made them so good.

The reinvention was led by Robert Zagame, architect Robert Ficara and Interlandi Mantesso Architects, and the interior design team, Linda Whitfield, Surround Style and Kas Makohon of Lukas Partners.

Many of the furnishings and artworks were sourced through boutique local suppliers, and distinctive commissioned artworks speaking to the eclectic aesthetic of the hotel were completed onsite by Ryan Foote, Rosie Wood, Lulu Zagame and Karl Gordon.

Great consideration was given to brand collaborations, curated to match the ethos; organic UK bath and body brand Cowshed is supplied to guests, staff uniforms are designed and produced by Australian fashion label Robbandlulu, and the mini bar showcases locally-roasted coffee by Mansfield Coffee Merchants, hand-selected Everleigh Bottling Co. cocktails, and house-made sweet and savoury treats. A cheeky 'Lover's Kit' is provided containing all the intimate essentials, which Taloni says gets used more than you'd think.

There is also a coffee house and kitchen, and a private event space with custom TSAR-designed carpet, bespoke chef-designed menus, and state-of-the-art conferencing technology, for weddings to corporate events.

Many aspects of Zagame's House were fashioned to reflect

the lifestyle preferred by its creators, such as the wine bar designed as a wine cellar in a house, the big kitchen table for serving breakfast in café Lobby 1851, and fixtures and fittings inspired by a favourite hotel in Chicago.

The House's wine shop and bar, Lord Lygon, will be headed up by award-winning executive chef, Chris Bonello, delivering menus of tapas and beverages that champion local farmers, distillers and producers.

Taloni says the end result was a confluence of want and circumstance.

"I guess it was at a stage with the existing property they had to either spend some money doing it up to maintain it or start afresh. What came about was more of a labour of love rather than a market need or opportunity."

## Breaking Rules in the House

Taloni entered Zagame's House a month after it opened, with the hardware and team already in place ready for fine-tuning through his creativity, leadership, and general knowledge of the industry. He cites that one of his strongest traits is challenging the status quo, and the freedom he's been given in the role sees that reflected in a multitude of places.

"In hotels you always have the food & beverage department. I said 'Why is food always first?' When you go to breakfast the

first thing you're asked is 'Can I get you a coffee?'. You go to dinner, first thing they ask is 'Can I get you a drink?' We have a wine shop bar that has over 300 classic hand-selected wines ...

"Our hero here is actually the beverage side of the business. That's not to say the food's not good, it's amazing, but drinks are the lead. So we renamed it Beverage & Food."

Another Taloni initiative is one being seen increasingly in broader hospitality, allowing dogs. The House has six larger rooms where guests can bring their pooch. The hotel offers a collaboration with Mad Paws, where locals can quote to walk, babysit, wash or preen pets while you stay, and another partnership with a lost dogs home sees \$10 donated from every booking with a dog.

Taloni says he was denied when he requested doing this at Ovolo, although the group has since come to allow dogs at most its properties, and chalks the House adoption as another win for family-owned operations.

"Dogs are part of your family. They're our best friends and about 60 per cent of households in Australia have pets, so why do we ditch them when we go on holidays? They've been doing it for decades in America and Europe and to my knowledge no-one has ever died because a dog stayed in the hotel room before them.

"People ask if we have a restriction on size. No, because a Chihuahua can do more damage than a Great Dane if it wants to; if you damage something you pay for it. They've just got to be accompanied – we can't have dogs barking all night with people out partying."

One the front line, February saw the introduction of the new 'Maître Z' role, welcoming Daniel Gamba to the team to serve as a





combination of concierge, host, and Maitre D to offer bespoke experiences.

Launched simultaneously is the new check-in 'menu', allowing guests to choose their style of check-in service. The 'Quickie' is largely for corporate guests, eager to get upstairs and unwind. 'Déjà vu' is for returning guests who know their way around, and the Grand Tour is typically for leisure guests who want the full experience, shown all the facilities and escorted to their rooms. Fridays will soon see the Grand Tour addition of a welcoming glass of wine, sparkling or water.

"We want to keep it fresh," says the GM. "I've got all these ideas of things I want to implement here, but it's going to take time."

## Finding The Way ...

Boutique hotel properties akin to Zagame's House attract an amazing array of demographics, Taloni reports. Working in the lobby all day gives him opportunity to gauge the success of initiatives in real time, starting at check-in. During their stay a survey is provided to every guest, asking for feedback on whether they liked something – or not. But a culture has also been developed amongst staff that when anything positive or negative arises he is alerted, allowing opportunity to act on things while the guest is still on the premises.

Taloni personally responds to every survey to thank the guest, and while accepting that the hotel is not suited for everyone, where required apologises if they didn't get it right to "keep that relationship alive". The aim is to make it possible that guest will return, which he says many do. He counts several former complaint guests from prior roles as friends.

Much of the feedback is subsequently fed to the 'think tank' – a selection of staff, featuring highly creative types, someone very analytical and practical, and someone senior and neutral.

New ideas and solutions are put through them, some needing adaptation and more research, others implemented quickly.

"I guess the proof will be in the pudding, but I never stop coming up with ideas," says Taloni. "I coach my team, and a lot of ideas we work on come from my daily staff members. If I'm excited about change then they start getting excited too."

Open less than a year, some proof has already been found in Zagame's House rocketing to number one boutique hotel position on TripAdvisor in Melbourne, which it has already held for several months.

From his lobby station, keeping an eye on what's going on in the kitchen, what's being displayed on the TVs, and of course each guest to reception, Taloni is keeping the Zagame creed close to hand, armed with warm and genuine service and a hands-on attitude.

"It doesn't matter if you've got the shiniest, newest product, if you don't deliver what you promise or you're charging too much, then you don't satisfy the customer. Over the years I've seen many hotels open, and the PR's amazing and the property looks good, and within a year or two they dive and their rates are half of what they opened with – because they don't deliver.

"The true telling how successful you are, I think, is if you deliver expectations to the guest. If you fall short that's when you get complaints and disappointment.

"It's called a House, but to me a house is just a building, a home is where there's heart and soul. We like to make our guests feel at home."



Marcus Radny