

DRIFTING TO THE TOP

By Lloyd Green | mmnews@mmail.com.my

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ADELAIDE-BORN Robert Gilliland is part-artist, part-food lover, part-entertainer, part-sommelier and full-time visionary.

He first planted his seed for a bar and restaurant in Kuala Lumpur in 2007 having accumulated over 10 years of experience in the hospitality industry — seven of which were spent as a sommelier in highly awarded restaurants such as Flying Fish and Marque in Sydney. He then spent three years in Malaysia and the Philippines as managing director of fine wine importer Straits Wine Company.

But it wasn't until leaving his post as executive producer and owner of Asian-based media company Global Television in 2014 that his concept came to life.

A year later, the award-winning Drift Dining and Bar in the heart of Bukit Bintang is regularly topping KL's best restaurants lists.

Gilliland, 37, said Drift is no ordinary establishment because it is backed by passion in everything they do.

"So many places fail because they don't know why they are doing something," he said.

"I believe great things happen through passion rather than money."

As such, everything Gilliland and his team does — from design to presentation, food and service — is centred around their promise of providing the ultimate experience for their customers.

"Nothing here is an accident. For me this is a visual representation of 'Drift'," he enthused, when describing the restaurant's fluid layout.

"Each space is carefully designed to protect the experience of the individual."

"We wanted to create an atmosphere that is unique for the customer — a place where they feel as comfortable as in their home."

So why Malaysia?

Eight years ago when Gilliland first came to Malaysia as managing director of the Straits

Wine Company, he knew Kuala Lumpur was the perfect place for a restaurant and bar concept of this nature.

But back then, the timing wasn't quite right.

Malaysia was still finding its way through the evolving bar and restaurant scene with only a handful of establishments in the Changkat area blossoming.

Gilliland said Kuala Lumpur has come a long way and with wages on the rise and business booming, he believes his patience is certainly being rewarded.

"No idea works everywhere, no idea works at every moment. You need the perfect combination of timing, talent, money and location."

"Right now Malaysia is perfect for Drift. But eight years ago this would not have worked," said Gilliland, who is also a shareholder of Mikey's Original New

York Pizza in KL.

"Affluence has certainly increased in Kuala Lumpur and there are a lot more offerings here now."

"In terms of the hospitality industry, what has always come first in Kuala Lumpur has been the money."

"Now you're starting to find places like Drift that have been built around passion. This is what people feel most comfortable with and they are beginning to notice the effort."

Gilliland is the captain of a well-oiled ship and it has been his emphasis on creating "the best service in town" as well as "amazing food and amazing wine" that has seen Drift rise to popularity.

"The main hurdle to success in Malaysia has never been food, but rather staff and service which have created a very inconsistent and often frustrating experience for the customer."

"You should never notice great service. It should be like magic. It should just happen."

"That's why two years ago I came back to Malaysia to create the kind of restaurant and bar I love in Sydney — the kind that has a casual confidence about it. The sort of casual restaurant that only top chefs, waiters, bartenders and sommeliers can pull off because they have a great passion for environments where the food, drink and the service do the talking."

"I've worked tirelessly in building my team. They come from all corners of the globe. But what's most important is that they have bought into this same passion that I have," he concluded.

Drift Dining and Bar is hosting their Decanted wine tasting evening with Penfolds Southeast Asia ambassador Patrick Dowling on Wednesday from 7pm to 9pm.

There will be six varieties of Penfolds wine on offer, paired with delicious canapés and light bites.

For more details or to reserve your table contact events@driftdining.com or call 03-21102079.

The professional sommelier has over 10 years' experience in the hospitality industry.

