

MEET RICHARD GRIFFIN

Dreamer, traveller, entrepreneur. The founder of Madame Zingara.



“An extraordinarily energetic magician...” – Leadership Magazine

It's been just over seven years since Richard Griffin stood by as the 80-year old Belgian Spiegel tent named Victoria came to South African shores. It arrived with a dream – to transform the dining experience for South Africans and to build on the Madame Zingara legacy that Richard had created...

It worked. But Richard admits he was terrified. “There had been nothing like this in South Africa. I had no idea if it would be a success. I was just a chef and all of a sudden I had this massive Spiegel tent and a theatre production that needed to be of international standard. I was terribly excited about the new venture but business is risk and risk is business.” The aptly named Theatre of Dreams has travelled the major cities of South Africa and almost a million have been to see the spectacular show. It's quickly evolved into a smashing success and a favourite night out for many.

But the Theatre of Dreams was not the starting point of Richard's entrepreneurial journey. He started working in kitchens at the age of 13 and left school at 16 to pursue this newfound passion for food and hospitality. It was at Groot Constantia's Jonkershuis that he met Sweet Lena, a mentor who took him under her wing and taught him everything from baking to handling the hot stoves. His friendship with Sweet Lena is incredibly strong till this day and he easily shares his respect: “She gave me the confidence to realize my passion. That's something I hold close to my heart and I handle all my staff in the same manner.”

After some travelling, Richard returned home and got his break with his own restaurant in Long Street. "It was a tiny store called Serendipity and it was based on my love for pasta. After that I opened House of Serendipity and Griffin's, sold them and went to travel some more." After satisfying his ever-present wanderlust he finished his degree at Le Cordon Bleu International in London (despite his lack of formal education) before heading back home. On his return he met Nicky-Anne (current Marketing Manager) and opened the original Madame Zingara in Loop Street in 2001. The restaurant was booked out for weeks at a time. The combination of over-the-top costumes and characters, friendly service, surprising food combinations and near-obsessive attention to detail amazed and delighted the Cape. Richard says it was never meant to be a long-term endeavor. "I was planning on selling the restaurant after two years but it just evolved into this larger entity, into a brand."

But tragedy struck in 2006. The beloved Loop Street restaurant burnt down. Thankfully, it didn't take long for the Madame to get back on her feet. In 2007, the Theatre of Dreams launched in Cape Town and audiences were thrilled. South Africa now had a dining experience like no other and the shows were sold-out month after month. On this high note, Madame Zingara ventured to the UK, but the economic crisis struck and the company was forced into liquidation in 2008. It was a tough four years for Richard. "I felt like I had failed so many people. I was down in the dumps. But I just couldn't let it go. This was my dream and I worked too hard to just give up on it." To get back on his feet, Richard involved himself in a number of projects, including The Bombay Bicycle Club at the top of Cape Town's trendy Kloof Street, and The Sidewalk Cafe in Vredehoek. Finally, after a year in hiatus, Richard brought his beloved Madame Zingara back to her hometown of Cape Town at the beginning of June 2010. The Love Magic Tour is, in Richard's own words, "Something that will define me for many years to come."

Since then, he has opened five other restaurants, a retail outlet and an eclectic laundromat in the Mother City with the latest Zingara endeavour being the much-anticipated Company's Garden Restaurant (Haarlem & Hope), which will be opening in spring this year.

When asked about his unique management style, Richard says his road to success is something he wouldn't want to change. "I'm so grateful for all the weird and wrong things I did – I'm glad I never took the normal route. My journey has been perfect for where I wanted to be in business." From dishwashing in Israel to working ridiculously long hours in kitchens around Mozambique and Australia, Richard has developed empathy for all labour roles, is very involved in all departments and believes the backbone of any business is the staff.

What does the future hold? Richard says he still dreams big and would like to double the size of the company in the next year. "People often raise their eyebrows when I talk about my ideas. It's the fear factor that excites me. I have so many ideas and it's a

never-ending creative process. Fundamentally, I want to make people happy and I'll strive to do so until I'm no longer able to."

Richard's advice for upcoming entrepreneurs is short but clear. "When people roll their eyes and tell you to shut up – ignore them. Focus on your dream and never let go."

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