

A professional portrait of Emad Yacoub, a man with a shaved head, smiling warmly. He is wearing a light grey suit jacket over a dark blue patterned shirt and a dark tie. He is leaning against a dark, textured wooden pillar. A watch with a white face and black dial is visible on his left wrist. The background is dark and out of focus.

DREAM WEAVER: Emad Yacoub,
co-founder, president & CEO,
Global Restaurant Group



INDEPENDENT RESTAURATEUR OF THE YEAR

GAME CHANGER

Emad Yacoub's vision for innovation, employee engagement and community work elevates Vancouver's Glowbal Restaurant Group to acclaim

BY LAURIE JONES | PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT KARPA

Few people speak of the Canadian dream, but Emad Yacoub is proof it exists. When the 19-year-old university-trained accountant moved to Canada from Egypt in 1984, he didn't speak a word of English. Today, the energetic entrepreneur is co-founder, president and CEO of Vancouver's Glowbal Restaurant Group, overseeing the daily operations of eight successful restaurants.

Yacoub's story began with his first Canadian job as a kitchen helper at Toronto's Harbour Castle Hilton. By the age of 28 he was one of the youngest executive chefs in the city, holding the position of chef de cuisine at the King Edward Hotel. His reputation as a chef grew, and, in 1997, he was recruited by Joe Fortes Seafood & Chophouse in Vancouver. "I was at Joe Fortes for two years, and it was an amazing experience," says Yacoub, recalling fondly the place he met his wife, Shannon.

Eventually, Yacoub opened a restaurant in Vancouver, which became the foundation of the Glowbal Restaurant Group. "We started with one concept in 2002 — the Glowbal Grill in Yaletown — and now we are on the verge of having 15 or 16 restaurants by the end of 2014," he boasts. "On the day we



AFTER 11 YEARS IN BUSINESS, WE HAVE REACHED TOTAL SALES OF \$39 MILLION. WITHIN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, THE COMPANY HOPES TO ACHIEVE \$100 MILLION IN ANNUAL SALES

**— EMAD YACOUB,
CO-FOUNDER,
PRESIDENT & CEO**



opened our first location, we had seven or eight staff members, and a week later we jumped to 19 staff, because we realized we had a hit on our hands.”

The menu at the Glowbal Grill Steaks & Satay features international dishes, ranging from steak to seafood. But a major draw is the restaurant’s satay bar. “Twelve years ago, this was the first of its kind in Canada. We offer nine choices of small samples of grilled or braised meats, including venison dusted with coffee and chocolate, or braised short ribs with chocolate aioli, all for about \$2 each,” Yacoub says. For diners looking for a heartier meal, the Glowbal Grill offers 1.5 pounds of Dungeness crab (\$30.95) or its signature spaghetti and meatballs (\$24.95).

But, the Glowbal Grill was just the beginning. In 2011, Yacoub opened Coast and selected two of his managers to operate and invest in the restaurant. Today, the senior managers own 60 per cent of the Glowbal Restaurant Group operation — having personally invested anywhere from \$25,000 to \$100,000 — and Yacoub owns 40 per cent. His underlying principle embraces the belief that the group that helps him grow his business should also own a part of it, a belief that ultimately strengthens the business.

These days, the Glowbal Restaurant Group comprises the Glowbal Grill, Coast, Italian Kitchen, Trattoria, Society, Black+Blue, The Roof, The Fish Shack,

two IK2GO (Italian Kitchen To Go) locations and two lounges — Afterglow and O Lounge.

The past year has seen several innovations for the group, including the launch of a signature dish at Black+Blue. “One of our staff members is Jamaican, and he suggested an amazing jerk chicken marinade. Now, we offer our Barbecue Jerk Chicken served on a quinoa salad for \$16. It is so popular we sell at least 40 to 50 dishes every day,” Yacoub says.

A Jospur Wood Stone Grill was also added to the restaurant’s equipment line-up, the first of its kind in Canada and only one of 20 in North America. It’s fuelled with large pieces of Mesquite coal. The oven heats to 1,700°F on the bed and 800°F on the tray. “It took me two years to convince the City of Vancouver to allow this piece of equipment because wood-burning ovens were not previously allowed,” says Yacoub.

Of course, the 2010 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year hasn’t created his empire by himself; he rose through the ranks of Toronto’s kitchens with his VP and director of Operations. “I joined the organization in 2003, and I witness every day how Emad’s energy and passion for the business is boundless,” explains Jack Lamont, VP, and Yacoub’s best friend. “He gets an idea in his head and is always 10 steps ahead of everyone.”

As a respected chef himself, Lamont can relate to the decisions that make Yacoub’s restaurants successful. “With his background as a chef, Emad approves every menu and, through extensive training, makes sure the staff understands how he wants his business to be run. He motivates everyone,” says Lamont. “Emad and I both started at the bottom in restaurants. We know what it takes to be successful in each job, and we appreciate our staff. Everyone is thoroughly trained and cross-trained on the menu and service details.”

The education continues at the executive level as well. “There are so many different training programs in our company,” says Yacoub. “For example, we have accounting classes for managers,

taught by our head controller, and a concept development class for new restaurant ideas.”

Clearly, the dividends are paying off. This year, the remodelled Glowbal Grill is poised to grow its sales by \$1.4 million, an increase of approximately 30 per cent over 2012. Since 2002, the company’s sales growth has doubled every five years. “After 11 years in business, we have reached total sales of \$39 million. Within the next five years, the company hopes to achieve \$100 million in annual sales,” says Yacoub.

Mario Negris, SVP (PREC) with CBRE Limited has seen that drive for success first-hand. He worked with Yacoub on most of his Vancouver lease agreements. “Emad is meticulous in all aspects in his restaurants,” he says. “His attention to detail is like no one I’ve seen. He is fair and generous with his time, and he’s always at his restaurants.”

Yacoub’s passion extends to his regular participation in the industry (as a member of the British Columbia Restaurant and Foodservice Association) and the community at large. “We focus on the Union Gospel Mission (UGM),” he says. “For people who are down on their luck, just one hot meal gives them a sense of respect.” In partnering with the Union Gospel Mission, the Glowbal Group team founded the Table for 2,000 program, which now feeds many more than that annually. In fact, over the past four years, the Glowbal team has donated food and time to serve more than 30,000 healthy hot meals to those in need, raising more than \$90,000 in monetary donations for UGM.

And, it doesn’t end there. In house, the Glowbal Group boasts a culinary training centre at its head office. “Our chefs donate their time to teach classes that include 12 to 14 students every semester,” explains Yacoub. “At the end of the training, the student that has the best marks, attendance and other achievement markers gets mentored by me. We’ll meet for approximately half an hour a week and discuss his or her career plans.” For the noted restaurateur, it’s all in a day’s work. ●