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OPEN SEASON —Burma

Preface

Monocle meets the foreign investors and returning natives making the most of a budding business market in Yangon, Asia's new rising trade magnet.

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- 01 View of Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon from Vista Bar terrace
- 02 Fresh from the oven at Yangon Bakehouse
- 03 Trainee chefs learn the ropes at Shwe Sa Bwe restaurant



Tucked away down a leafy side street on the northern shore of Yangon's Inya Lake, two Michelin star-winning French chefs show young Burmese how to slice truffles for a rich *forestiere* sauce. Shwe Sa Bwe recently celebrated its first birthday and its bookings list reflects a city in flux: tourists, embassy staff and wealthy businessmen.

It's one of a number of recent arrivals to join the city's restaurant scene that is driven by new money and a hunger for high-end cuisine. Yangon is a city playing catch-up. The trainees here are drawn from a network of monasteries and orphanages across the country, and schooled in the art of French cooking. Its owner, François Stoupan, doesn't expect to turn a profit until the end of next year but has a wider goal to train nearly 50 young locals who will disperse to kitchens around the city. "We take in underprivileged, but not destitute, children and train them to a high standard of cheffing," he tells MONOCLE.

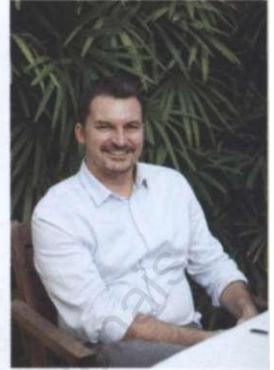
Setting up business in Burma is riddled with obstacles. But as the country emerges from decades of stultifying junta-led rule, bold investors are streaming in. "I felt there was a gaping hole in the hospitality industry," says Nico Elliott, who left a London career in finance and moved to Yangon earlier this year to set up the chic riverside Union

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Bar and Grill with his partner, Camilla Stopford Sackville, and local investors.

Business has exceeded expectations but the Union is "just the start", says Elliott. The couple are working on their next projects - a contemporary "chick-ener", or yakitori and sake bar, as well as a boutique hotel and a speakeasy-cum-nightclub. "We want to set up a variety of places here: to stay, to eat, to drink. After all, this is the time," he adds.

Burma's quickly changing former capital presents an exciting prospect to entrepreneurs such as Elliott. But some argue that years of political oppression have left the Burmese at a disadvantage to foreign investors. Myo Min, who runs the PS Business School in Yangon, fears that the changes are happening too quickly. "We used to understand the market here," he says. "Now we don't know what will happen next and how to compete with the new giants. There are very few financial resources if we want to [start] our own business. [The government] is deregulating the market but there are lots of things that need reforming."

Despite this, a crop of homespun businesses is emerging. Many of them are Burmese natives who have returned to their estranged homeland bursting with ideas. Such an example can be found in the fifth-floor apartment of a nondescript Yangon block - the last place you'd expect to find a New York-style fashion operation. Here, designer Mo Hom and several assistants cut and sew swathes of silks next to racks of creations for her first Asian boutique, opening in Singapore later this year.

It's a long way from the world Mo Hom built when she left Burma a decade ago to study fashion design in New York. She worked for various fashion houses before opening her own boutique Lotus Hom in Soho in 2011.

Even as the business was taking off, Burma's rapid opening in 2012 appeared to be the "perfect moment" to re-engage with her home country. "I wanted to be part of it and to contribute to Burma's development," she says.

Not long after, she closed up in New York and returned to launch an entirely new range of "Made in Myanmar" creations in Yangon's first professional fashion show in early 2013. Mo Hom's clothes include high-end silks and fine linens from Shan state, with minimalist, clean lines, sold at Yangon's exclusive Governor's Residence hotel and in the new Singapore boutique. She is also branching out into food and has launched a range of packaged, organic homemade dishes based on her Shan traditions, which sell through Citymart, the country's leading supermarket chain.



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- 01 Shwe Sa Bwe chefs
- 02 François Stoupan, owner of Shwe Sa Bwe
- 03 Union Bar and Grill
- 04 Nico Elliott, founder of Union Bar and Grill
- 05 Pote Lee and Tun Hlaing, founders of Water Library, Yangon
- 06 Water Library
- 07 Bar at Water Library
- 08 Water Library entrance
- 09 Coffee Club, Yangon
- 10 Fashion designer Mo Hom
- 11 Shwedagon Pagoda



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The new wave

The arrival of Water Library, a gourmet restaurant and cocktail bar in a sprawling colonial mansion in an affluent part of central Yangon, is a discreet yet powerful symbol of Burma's international emergence. Diners can easily pay \$150 (€110) a head for dinner and drinks here. With training from chefs who have worked at Copenhagen's acclaimed Noma restaurant, it has already made a mark with distinctive, elaborate cuisine and cocktails created by Italian bartender Mirko Gardelliano.

It is also an important symbol for Pote Lee, a Burma-born publishing tycoon, who is re-engaging with his country after decades away - not just with high-end restaurants but also a range of philanthropic programmes including supplying educational resources to schools and

institutions. "I want to give back to this country. I left in my late teens but it gave me so much," he says. Lee left Burma for Bangkok and landed a scholarship to study engineering. He specialised in water systems but soon realised that books were his passion.

After setting up a textbook publishing company with his Thai wife Yoon, he turned to his other great love - fine food and wine. It seemed a logical fit to call his first restaurant Water Library. "It brings together all the things I love," he says. He is now rapidly expanding the Thailand restaurant empire, even as he moves into Burma.

Is Yangon ready for Water Library? "Most definitely," he says. "There is money here and discerning people who want the best of everything when they dine out - and I want to be the best of the best." mywaterlibrary.com



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Foreign interest

Corporate giants have been piling into Burma since sanctions were lifted in 2012. Japan lent \$3.2bn (€2.36bn) to build a special economic zone and deep-sea port in Dawei. Nissan plans to build a car assembly plant. US giants Cisco, PepsiCo and Visa have set up shop and Coca-Cola opened a Yangon factory in June. Yet a new report says that Chinese investment has plummeted. Two Chinese projects - the Myitsone dam and the Letpadaung copper mine - were suspended after local protests. But Chinese firms have built a \$2.5bn (€1.84bn) oil and gas pipeline to supply China's Yunnan province.



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One untold story of the democratisation process in Burma has been the return of the Burmese who fled abroad during the era of military rule. Of those who cut their teeth in businesses overseas, many have returned to invest in their homeland as the government loosens its grip on the economy and liberalisation gains pace. They are also a part of the changing face of Yangon and seek the same indulgences as the newly arrived Westerners.

Sébastien Rabeux, store manager for The Warehouse, a French-owned wine distributor that sells only imported produce and that last year moved into a property on Bogyoke Aung San Road, says he recently made a 83,200 (€2,390) sale to a Burmese businessman. "Burma is the best place in Asia to start a business, but you have to get here now," he says. "At the moment the market is young; by next year the competition will have grown and it may be too late."

There's no doubt that entrepreneurs in Burma are still finding their feet as investors flood in. Yet the food scene in Yangon has become both a barometer and agent of change. At one outfit, the Yangon Bakehouse, former female prisoners and factory employees are trained as cooks and readied for employment in the city's kitchens. Co-founder Heatherly Bucher says the women of the Bakehouse are part of "a lost generation" whose livelihoods were curbed by a junta that failed to provide the most basic social protections. Bucher says, "For the first time Burma sees that there can be benefits from entrepreneurship. The environment encourages creative thinking and this didn't exist before." —

Click return

It has been a long road for Thaug Su Nyein, a rising media and IT executive and one of Burma's most successful young entrepreneurs. In the 1990s, Thaug Su Nyein left New York in his final year of computer science studies to catch a new opening back home. He arrived back in Yangon 13 years ago with just \$5,000 (€3,697) to invest and a dream to start the country's first internet cafe. "When I arrived I discovered internet cafes were illegal, so the best way to proceed seemed to be to set up magazines about the internet and technology."

That enterprise, which began on a shoestring with just seven employees, has grown into an empire of nearly 450 staff and a multi-million dollar turnover. Along the way were tragedies, including the death of his father, a former foreign minister, who was imprisoned under dictator Than Shwe and died in jail in 2009.

Even so, Thaug Su Nyein has built a business that spans Seven Media, with publications including a daily and weekly newspaper, magazines and Information Matrix, which is involved in the telecoms and software businesses. The next phase is to capitalise on what he calls the "new connected era" as Burma upgrades its internet. "This is creating a whole new market for digital plays," he says.



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- 01 Yangon Bakehouse
- 02 Bakehouse staff including Kelly Macdonald (third from right)
- 03 Lunch hour at Yangon Bakehouse
- 04 Sébastien Rabeux, store manager of The Warehouse
- 05 The Warehouse
- 06 Thaug Su Nyein, managing director and founder of Information Matrix
- 07 Su Yi Lwiz, journalist at Information Matrix



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