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business review

BUSINESS INFORMED

# JAMES NOURI

## Restaurateur

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For the Central Coast  
a great year and  
more to come



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## For the love of business and the Central Coast By Phaedra Pym

**JAMES NOURI HAS** had confidence in Gosford and the greater Central Coast for far longer than the cranes have been visible in the sky. The second-generation restaurateur, owner/founder of Jimmy G's cafes and co-owner of a growing number of other local hospitality venues has achieved an extraordinary level of business success since opening his first café in Mann Street Gosford in 2001. But this success hasn't come overnight, nor has it come easily or been the result of a solo effort. This story shows how entrepreneurial spirit and a genuine love of business combined with strategic partnerships, a desire to learn and the courage to take risks are all key ingredients to James' growth story.

For as long as he can remember, James has been involved in hospitality. By the age of five he was serving garlic bread and making tips in his parents' Italian restaurant. He opened his first café, Central Espresso in Mann Street Gosford, at the age of eighteen. For the first four years he worked sixty hours a week for a personal income of \$250. Just when the business started turning a corner, James' landlord sold the building

**"I have always believed in Gosford. Too many business owners blamed Erina Fair for their failure when the truth was, they were blaming external factors when they should have been looking internally."**

and he lost the cafe. It was the first of many lessons learned – this one, to strategically execute your option on the lease. It was a mistake he would never make again.

Moving to Sydney to work and experience Sydney's vibrant dining and entertainment precincts, James returned to the Central Coast in 2009 with renewed passion and a mission to help invigorate the local dining scene. He re-launched Central Espresso in Carbow Arcade, opened Byblos Lebanese restaurant in Kibble Park in 2011 and rebranded the café to Jimmy G's in 2012. His decision to invest in Gosford showed faith in the future of the city when few others seemed to share that faith. James says, "I have always believed in Gosford. Too many business owners blamed Erina Fair for their failure when the truth was, they were blaming external factors when they should have been looking internally."

Over the following years James expanded the Jimmy G's brand, opening cafes at Riverside Park, William Street Gosford and in the Mariners Centre of Excellence at Tuggerah. Keen to focus on the Jimmy G's brand, James sold Byblos in 2014. It was during this period of growth that James started working with Tara Dickinson, who he originally employed as a café manager. They quickly discovered shared values, work ethics and a desire to change things up on the Central Coast. James and Tara's first joint venture was Tommy's on the waterfront at Gosford, which opened in 2014.

Today there are eight businesses across the portfolio – five Jimmy G's, owned by

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James, and three venues he co-owns with Tara – Tommy's, Pinocchio's at Gosford and the latest addition, Motel Mezza at Wyong. Together they are creating experiences that cater to a variety of target markets. While Jimmy G's caters to the corporate market, Tommy's has a more relaxed coastal vibe. Pinocchio's offers an extensive wine list including the largest wine by the glass offering (more than sixty) on the Central Coast and Motel Mezza, which opened in October, specialises in Middle Eastern cuisine and oozes chic art deco style in the 1938 heritage-listed building it occupies (the original Bank of Wyong). Both restaurants are already attracting visitors from as far away as Sydney and Newcastle.

James also credits his professional relationship with accountant and business adviser, Troy Marchant from Robson Partners, Gosford as another key to his success. The pair met in 2015 when James was seeking a good local accountant, someone who would be with him for the journey. According to Troy, James is one of the most natural entrepreneurs he has seen in twenty-five years of being an accountant. He says, "James' thirst for knowledge and

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the fact that he is entirely coachable sets him apart. Importantly, he also executes plans with intent. There's a formula we live and die by in business and that is – decisions you make multiplied by the actions you take equals results. James is not afraid to make decisions – many business owners are – and he's definitely not afraid to take action. If you make a 1/10 decision and you're 10/10 for action you get a leveraged bad result. But if you get a 10/10 decision and a 10/10 for action you're going to get a great result. James does both."

James has laid a strong foundation for a long-term sustainable growth story. The next step in the journey is to attract the right partners, which is the current status for the Jimmy G's brand. Troy says, "If you look at any large successful coffee chain like Gloria Jeans or Starbucks, there would have been a time where someone's come along and said, 'I believe in your story'. James' story is very engaging. He also fundamentally loves business. That's important because if you don't love business you're not going to go anywhere; business is tough. From a business coach's perspective, your business always has to be for sale and it always needs to be saleable for it to have true value. James' business has value."

Employing the right people has been another instrumental factor in the Jimmy G's growth story. James hires based on attitude and won't even consider someone who simply emails a resume. He has established a structured in-house training program and won't allow a new starter behind



Troy Marchant, James Nouri and Tara Dickinson

the coffee machine until they have been through a formal assessment. James says, "People these days do a six-hour course and think they're a qualified barista. But it takes two to three years to get really good at making coffee." For a transient industry, James' staff retention is very good. "There is the opportunity for people to grow, move from site to site and into upper management positions at Jimmy G's. And now there's also the opportunity for the right person to buy a store and run it under a licensing agreement," says James. Today he employs around forty staff at Jimmy G's and around ninety across the portfolio.

Growth comes with many challenges including the potential to lose control. Troy says, "You're either in high growth and low control or you're in really high control and no growth. The key is to find the balance."

The challenge with being an entrepreneur is that there are so many opportunities, it's sometimes hard to say no. The accountant's role is to pull in the reigns at times and let the rope go at others. Many people of James' generation are very 'now oriented'. But nothing happens without putting in the hard work."

With the Central Coast listed on the RLB National Crane Index for the first time in history, it is the most telling signal of growth and revitalisation that we have ever seen. Troy says, "The local chamber has more momentum than ever before and big names are coming. This should flow on to local businesses. So if you're in business and you're on the Central Coast then you're in the right place at the right time." As far as James' entrepreneurial journey is concerned, the message is clear: watch this space.

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