

**Publication: The Peak Magazine Online**

**Date: 02 Jan 2017**

**Headline: How Alex Chew and Raj Datwani Morphed Their Lifestyles into the Hottest Businesses Around Town**



**[VIDEO] How Alex Chew and Raj Datwani Morphed Their Lifestyles into the Hottest Businesses Around Town**

**They have produced a megawatt music festival, had their restaurant clinch a Michelin star and launched an executive business lounge. This year, the prolific duo are set to get the city buzzing once again.**

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02 Jan 2017

Food & Drink, Interviews, Lifestyle

[Alex Chew](#), [Co-Working Space](#), [Food](#), [Ivan Brehm](#), [Lifestyle](#), [Madison Rooms](#), [Raj Datwani](#), [The Kitchen at Bacchanalia](#), [Ultra](#)

It's 2015, and Raj Datwani and Alex Chew have just landed the rights to bring [Ultra](#), one of the world's biggest electronic music festivals, to town the following year. They're on the hunt for the perfect site to hold the festival, one that can match iconic venues like Miami's Bayfront Park, and there is one spot they can't stop thinking about – an open field at Marina Bay, next to Marina Bay Sands Tower 1. The pair see a rare opportunity to put Singapore on the map.

Fast forward to preparing for the second Ultra outing in June this year, and they're ready to look back on the inaugural event. "Some people looked at us like we were crazy to throw the Ultra Festival at Marina Bay," says Datwani, 35, with a laugh.



**MEGA FUN** The first Ultra Festival in Singapore packed in the millennial crowd with its mix of electronic dance, house and techno music.

For starters, it was no easy task convincing multiple government authorities to give their go-ahead. Not to mention that the site was an entirely untested venue. “You couldn’t go to another event organiser and ask what their experience was like,” recalls 31-year-old Chew. As for facilities, there was none – no water, electricity, or Wi-Fi.

“The location is so iconic and beautiful. Anybody who sees the images know that it’s Singapore,” says Chew. The inaugural event played to a massive 45,000-strong crowd from over 60 countries, featuring top acts such as Norwegian [DJ Kygo](#), Swedish [DJ Axwell](#) and American-Chinese producer [Zhu](#). The event was also streamed live to half a million people around the world, with the Singapore skyline in full view.



“For us to be able to do Ultra and to have the sort of reception that it did is a testament to this generation of millennials and how open they’ve become. They’ve culturally changed, along with the world. Six years ago, I’m not sure if the reception would have been like that,” reflects Datwani. The pair have a knack for capitalising on the moment. They’ve started and grown not one, but three ventures that are making waves in Singapore. Alongside producing Ultra, they manage and co-own the newly minted one-Michelin-star restaurant [The Kitchen at Bacchanalia](#), as well as launched [Madison Rooms](#), an executive business lounge, last year.

It’s not hard to see how they’ve accomplished so much in so little time. After all, they are first and foremost consummate professionals; at the photo shoot, both respond to every instruction by our art director without missing a beat. When asked to take on the BFF Challenge – with questions testing their knowledge of each other – it’s clear what makes them tick: food, and their love for having a good time. Says Chew: “We want to encourage people to let loose and enjoy themselves.”

*VIDEO: The visionary pair behind popular music festival Ultra Singapore and Bacchanalia have their friendship put to the test.*

## **DELIVERING FUN**

The leisurely life is something the two men know a lot about. Though born and raised in opposite sides of the world – Datwani grew up in the US, Chew in Thailand – their lifestyles were similarly fun-driven. Describing themselves as “entertainers at heart”, the well-heeled duo share a love of good food, entertaining and travel. You’re just as likely to find them in Los Angeles checking out the coolest clubs, as spending a summer in the south of France, or planning a trip – next stop, Patagonia.

They both met by chance in an elevator in 2011, while heading to a mutual friend’s party. Datwani had just moved to Singapore in June 2010 from New York to pursue opportunities in a faster-moving



Asia. A graduate in international business, he had already run a women's fashion business and a real estate venture back in the US.

Though born in Singapore, Chew spent his childhood and early teenage years in Thailand, where his father ran the KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell franchises. He returned to Singapore at age 16 and initially found the city "boring". He later pursued business administration at Singapore Management University, spent several years working for Thai company [Charoen Pokphand \(CP\) Group](#) and started a sports supplements business.



**PHOTOGRAPHY** Tan Wei Te **ART DIRECTION** Fazlie Hashim **STYLING** C.K.Koo

For both, Singapore in 2010 was a city ripe with possibilities, due to the construction of the integrated resorts. "The city was getting so vibrant. The clubs and F&B were a lot better. It was also a period of time when a lot of the millennial generation had come back from studying overseas and were trying to do things here. You could feel a shift in attitude and personality. Singapore became a very exciting town to live in. That's when we really started our friendship as well," says Chew.

They started partying and hanging out with mutual friends, and found they both shared a world view held by the millennial age. "We define the millennials more as a mindset, rather than age. Experiences make millennials tick. It's about enjoying the now and not being afraid to do things that are out of the box," says Datwani.

It wasn't long before they started brainstorming together. "In our minds, there was no reason why Singapore couldn't have certain concepts," says Datwani. He recalls attending brunch parties in New York. He says: "Those were the most fun days of the year – you go in a group of eight and leave in a group of 20." The duo started creating Saturday brunch parties in Singapore. During their first brunch party in March 2012 with 60 guests, they saw people start dancing on couches at three o'clock in the afternoon. "For me, that was a big moment because I came from New York where that

was the norm. We started seeing success when people began prioritising Saturday afternoon over Friday night,” says Datwani.

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**– Raj Datwani**

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Their brunch parties soon caught on, and by their fourth event, the crowd had grown to 500. Their success with those early parties gave them a sense of a changing mood on the ground. They also discovered their knack for entertaining and creating events that could draw crowds.

“When we create something, we realise that it takes time for people to understand when it’s a newer concept. That’s just what’s inside of us: We want to create something cool that perhaps hasn’t been seen before,” says Datwani.

### **Learning from Hard Knocks**

Their predilection for mixing new concepts hasn’t always turned out the way they expected. Their original Bacchanalia restaurant in Coleman Street, opened in April 2013, took off , with the mixing of daytime parties and food finding success. But by late 2015, serious foodies who went to the restaurant were turned off by the bar and loud music. “We learnt that parties and fine dining don’t mix!” reflects Datwani.

They moved the restaurant to Hongkong Street in August 2015, with a name and concept change: The Kitchen at Bacchanalia. Besides cutting seating from around 100 to 36, they eliminated the barriers between the kitchen and dining area.

“With so many food programmes on TV, people want to see what’s happening in the kitchen. We used to stick a video camera on one of our chefs and project the video on a wall. When we had a chance to re-invent Bacchanalia, we said, why don’t we let people truly see what’s happening?” says Chew.



**DISH TO DIE FOR** Two years in the making, uni pasta with chocolate and sauce vierge is a must-try.

Acknowledging that kitchens can be stressful places, it was their belief in then head chef Ivan Brehm, and their team, which gave them the confidence to take on the challenge. Says Datwani: “From a chef’s perspective, it’s a massive change, because they are effectively learning a new way of communication: with their eyes instead of speaking. That got us very excited, because that’s very forward on a global level.” Today, they both enjoy watching people’s reactions as they walk through the door. Chew says: “People still get very surprised. Here you can literally tap the chef on the shoulder.” Brehm’s food impressed the Michelin Guide inspectors so much that they awarded the restaurant [a coveted star](#) late last year.

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