



## ETIENNE'S STORY

Etienne Sabbagh did not start off as a restaurant owner and consultant. There's a difference between presenting a finalized dish and starting from the beginning, by carefully selecting the ingredients, blending them together, and understanding every step from the dicing to the grilling to the serving. Etienne started from the beginning. His experience started as a waiter in various restaurants and progressed through studying hotel management and focusing on the food and beverage industry. His experience was built on not just the 'finished meal', but each and every one of the steps needed to get there. He entered this business with a deep understanding of its components – knowledge that was essential in his decision making during the crises we are facing.

Baron and Tasty Kitchens – a consulting company that either analyzes an existing restaurant's current operations and menu and gives advice accordingly or helps new concepts establish themselves – are the perfect blend of these experiences. Baron is a six-year-old hidden gem located in Mar Mkhayel with an open kitchen concept, a flavorfully organic menu, and an atmosphere dedicated to celebrating life – a heartfelt ode to Beirut. Unfortunately, the original vision of Baron is no longer what it is today; an extra spoon of adjustments and pinch of reinvention has changed some of its aspects while preserving its essence. For an SME in Lebanon today, the challenges are endless, and each challenge taints the taste of the original experience. With the daunting bank crisis taking its toll on the cash availability in restaurants, owners can only withdraw less than a fifth of what they previously could. Additionally, some



suppliers are adding too much salt to the wound with their unreasonable prices and inconsistency. Both factors spiced up with a harsh lock down, necessitated by the global pandemic, called for necessary adjustments to ensure survival. At a first glance the issues are overwhelming. Etienne, however, deals with one problem at a time. He started by altering the menu of Baron by putting the spotlight on his star dishes, removing the less prominent ones, and including a section dedicated to vegetables. Furthermore, he is avoiding importing any expensive ingredients, relying on and scouring the local markets for the best quality products, and carefully thinking out the inevitable increase in prices. Additionally, he proposed the idea of giving a priority to vaccinating employees in this sector to lessen the apprehensions and fears felt by potential customers. Finally, as someone who was in his employees shoes a couple of years ago, he made sure not to fire a single one of them and even gave them their full salaries during the time they were closed for after the Beirut Blast – the greatest crisis of them all.

Locate. Help. Transport. Repeat. A cycle that briefly describes how Etienne spent the night of the blast. Despite Baron and his offices being in rubbles and some employees being injured, he managed to help others any way that he could and got the strength to transport the seriously injured victims on his motorcycle to the hospital throughout the entire night. As a member of Khaddit Beirut, Backbone, and the Syndicate of Restaurants, he played a key role in bringing the Mar Mkhayel neighborhood back to life and encouraging people to come back to the heart of Beirut, despite all the heartbreaking losses this area faced. He did not want anyone to feel alone and wanted to show other owners that they were all in this together and that they would try to



overcome it together. Helping around eighty restaurants reopen – Baron being one of them – was the biggest example of the strength in this unity and what they could achieve together.

After all main dishes, there is usually dessert. Something to wrap it up and end on a sweet note, despite any previous bitter tastes. For Baron, there is nothing sweeter than the taste of a better tomorrow that comes with plans of expanding abroad to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and a pop up in Dubai specifically, whilst also staying strong in Beirut. Because despite all the struggles, frustrations, and desperate need of backup plans, Beirut is the place to be, and Etienne does not plan on leaving.