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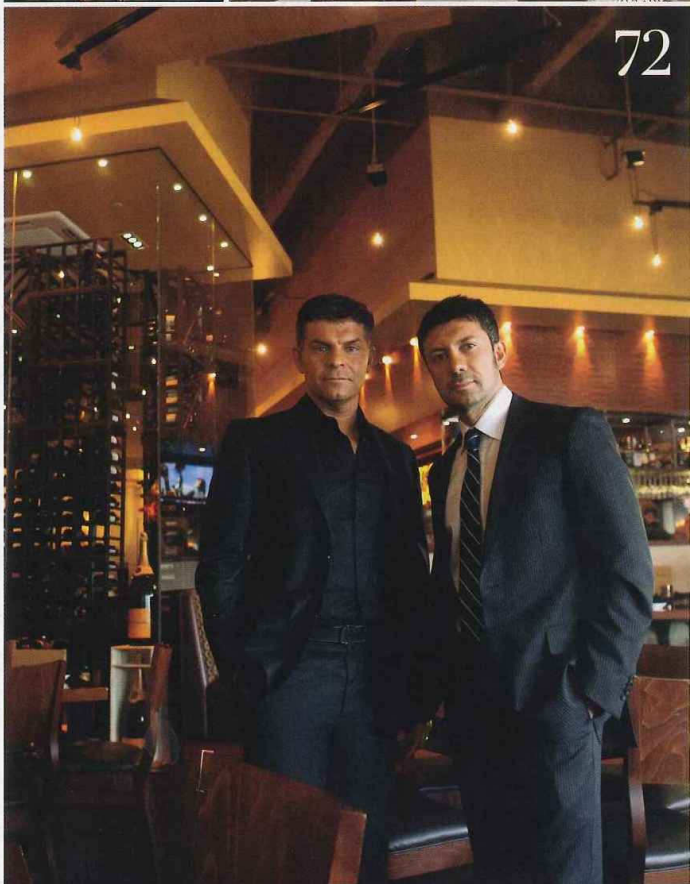
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**THE BROTHERS
BEHIND CRAVE
ARE FAST
BECOMING THE
DOMINANT
FORCE ON THE
TWIN CITIES
RESTAURANT
SCENE.**

BY VIRTUALLY ANY MEASURE, the restaurant company with the most mojo right now is Kaskaid Hospitality, operator of Crave, Uptown's Urban Eatery, and the new Sopranos at the West End. Crave debuted just four years ago, but in that short time Kaskaid has demonstrated a bloodless mastery of the restaurant business rarely seen in these parts.

Not content to merely replicate a successful formula, Kaskaid is making a credible play for the foodie market while birthing an ambitious new Italian concept and reinventing another restaurant. Considering most serious students of the local food scene waved Crave off as an unexciting formula restaurant not long after it opened in the Galleria, the transformation, in the course of a year, is compelling stuff.

Crave's partners are brothers Kam and Keyvan Talebi, who have a long history in the Twin Cities business community but are little known even today in the

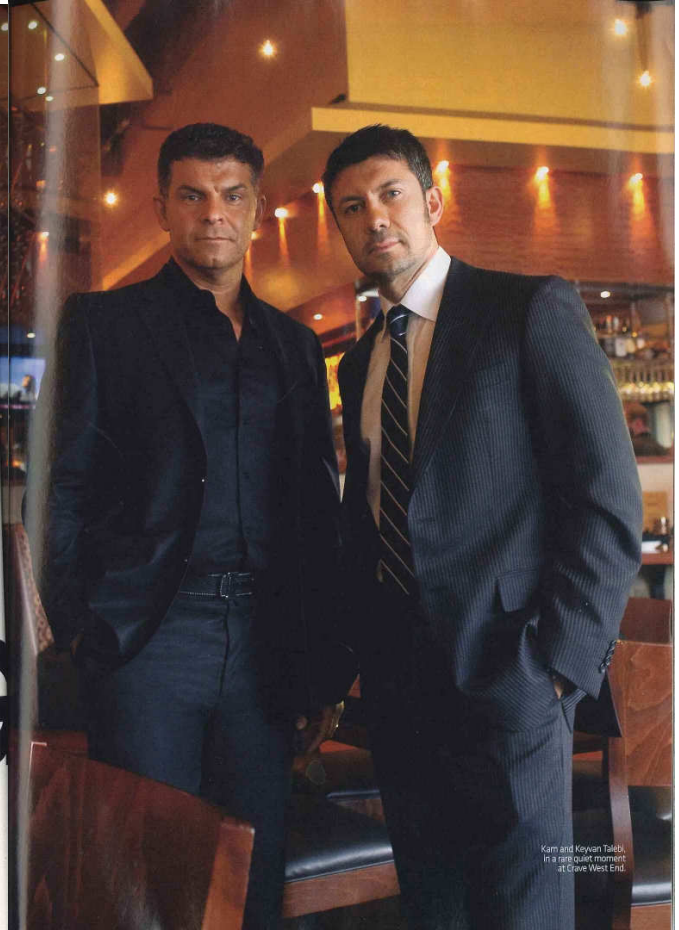
restaurant world. Their approach to the business contrasts with the town's other big operators in that they are, first and foremost, businessmen. There is little trace of the ego and edge that makes chronicling companies such as Parasole and D'Amico & Partners so interesting.

They are low-profile but have built several of the Twin Cities' top-grossing restaurants. Crave at Galleria was a hit from day one, and its expansion this summer to downtown Minneapolis will represent a break from its formula of mall outposts.

Insiders were shocked when much-awarded local chef JP Samuelson departed Solera in December for Kaskaid's Sopranos Italian Kitchen, which was to debut in late March. Samuelson is a food-driven chef through and through. "I did my research," he says. "People say great things about Keyvan and Kam. They are very involved, without micro-managing. They are open to ideas. They listen to you."

CRAVING IT ALL

BY ADAM PLATT
// PHOTOS BY
STEPHANIE COLGAN



Kam and Keyvan Talebi. In a rare quiet moment at Crave West End.

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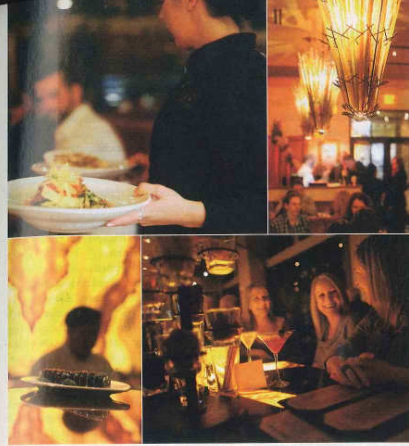
THE TALEBI BROTHERS are not deeply known in the Twin Cities restaurant universe, even though they came to it at a relatively early stage of their careers. Kam, 42, is the strategic driver of the company, a business prodigy who graduated from high school at 16. Keyvan, 38, the consummate little brother, focuses on operations. ("Everybody loves him," one employee said, unprompted.) Keyvan (he interchangeably goes by "Kevin" and "Keyvan") is more prominent on the social scene, appearing in this magazine's Home Tours issue three years ago from his penthouse condo at The Carlyle.

The Talebis were born in Iran and moved to the United States as children, arriving in early 1979 to seek medical treatment at Mayo Clinic for their mother, Shahnaz, who was suffering from what had been diagnosed as terminal cancer. Their father, Karim, owned a home in Fort Collins, Colorado, where they originally settled, but commuting between Colorado and Rochester became too onerous and the family moved to Burnsville.

"Our mother returned to health and is an inspiration to us," Keyvan says. "And our father is a pillar. He gave everything to his family." An energy executive in Iran, he did not return after the overthrow of the Shah and lost all the family had. "He gave up his health, his career," Kam explains. Karim became an assembler for Control Data.

The boys were thrown in public school knowing no English during the peak of the hostage crisis with Iran, at ages 6 and 9, respectively. "It was very tough," says Keyvan, but they clearly prospered.

Kam attended St. Olaf and received a business degree from the University of Minnesota. He then became immersed in corporate America, working for



a Control Data spinoff and Sylvan Learning Centers' testing division. Prometric. He later founded a tech company, iCommunicate.com, which he sold to Microsoft.

Keyvan was a prominent prep tennis player and ultimately attended the U of M. He is one of the founders of reVamp! SalonSpa.

The brothers' introduction to hospitality came as investors in the start-up of Bellanote, as minority partners with David Koch. "They were business deals: structure the investment, hire a general manager," recalls Kam. "David became the face of the business. At the end of the day it wasn't what we wanted, philosophically.

"But we liked service and hospitality. We wanted to do something ourselves." The brothers attribute their quick success with Crave to previous career stops, inside and outside the biz.

"Restaurants have low barriers to entry but are incredibly complicated," explains Kam. "It requires many disciplines, and you have to hit on all cylinders. That's why so many fail. In my opinion, to succeed long term in the business you need lots of expertise, and we had experience in various disciplines."

When Galleria president Warren Beck selected Crave to take over the shuttered Sidney's space at Galleria in mid-2006, it was unexpected. The Talebis had several competitors for the space, including Parasole (which already operated Good Earth there) and were not viewed as likely winners.

"I told Warren you're getting a business guy," Kam recalls, "a guy that knows how to build, who has a track record. We're a different breed."

"They were very credible," Beck remembers. "Their business intelligence

THE CRAVE FORMULA

LOCATIONS: Malls and other high-traffic, primarily suburban spots

CUSTOMER: Primarily 25-30, female-centric, with disposable income, looking for comfort

FOOD: Variety, something for everyone, sushi is integral

BUILDOUT COST: \$1.3-\$1.5 million

REVENUES: \$4-\$5 million-plus per restaurant

INVESTORS: Own capital, small group of investors, privately held

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-Rick Nordvall

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“Restaurants are the only business where you take an order and deliver it in 20 minutes with high [customer] expectations—and do it 1,000 times a night.”

—Kam Talebi

was excellent; their plan was solid.”

The Crave concept in a nutshell was this: “Vibrant, chic, upscale casual,” Kam explains. “We saw the economy softening. Fine dining was becoming a dinosaur; there was a shift in spending. Crave is an approachable, value-driven, suburban concept geared to female diners. We wanted suburban; we wanted a mall location. We didn’t have a name, but Warren liked what we wanted to do. He was wary of sushi, but we said we’d do it right.”

“There was really no sushi in Edina at that point,” Keyvan adds. The first location’s Shea design was comfortable but derivative—slate, fireplaces, etc. The greatest-hits menu of pizza, pasta, salads, and proteins showed up all over town. Crave was Sidney’s for the Atkins generation, but for the sushi—a seemingly incongruous ethnic food that the brothers rightly had observed go mainstream. Sushi was breaking through largely with women, who liked its lightness and modest portions. It proved to be Crave’s masterstroke.

Crave opened with 220 seats. “We were successful, but small,” says Kam. “We had

confidence we had something, but was it bulletproof? There was one way to find out—to stand point blank at the end of a gun.

“We got a call from Mall of America,” Keyvan recalls.

Mall locations are double-edged swords. They bring traffic and often an all-day stream of diners, but malls are among the priciest real estate. Kam wanted Crave to be a mall restaurant. “Look at the most successful restaurants out there—P.F. Chang’s, Cheesecake Factory, Maggiano’s—they are mall restaurants.

“MOA wasn’t an easy decision,” Kam recalls, “but it was a well-calculated risk. The third floor space has its anxieties, but California Café thrived there for many years.” The Crave formula proved its mettle, growing at a faster trajectory at MOA than at Galleria, even with more than 400 seats, making it one of the larger restaurants in town.

If MOA was a calculated risk, Crave West End, which opened in late 2009, looked like a wild-eyed roll of the dice, debuting at the bottom of a recession in a near-empty lifestyle center. There was snickers and smirks among Crave’s competitors who knew the

back story.

Reportedly, Crave was to be the third restaurant at West End after Brio, a national Italian concept, and an eatery from Dean Vlahos, who later opened BLYD Kitchen in Minnetonka. Neither opened at West End, but rather than walk away as well, Crave doubled down and took the more prominent Brio site.

“We like the west ‘burbs,” Keyvan notes. “We knew it was going to come at West End.”

“That market was underserved,” Kam explains. “The West suburbs still are under-restauranted for the demographics.” He describes Crave West End, at 385 seats, as “successful from day one. I can’t say West End convinced me we’re a destination restaurant, but the site lends itself to pushing the envelope.”

West End began a period of breakneck growth and marked an upgrading of the company’s ambitions. Locations in Omaha and Orlando opened in early-to-mid 2010. Coral Gables (Miami) opens later this year. With each opening, Crave becomes a bit more stylish and ambitious. There are wine towers, huge expanses of copper, sleek fabrics.

Design is a partnership between Cameron Design and Shea. “They know our style,” says Keyvan. “Every single finish is hand-picked.”

The decision to grow out-of-market was inevitable. The Twin Cities can only support so many Craves. “We’re looking at strategic, disciplined growth,” says Kam. “The secret sauce is: Is it in line with our demographic and audience? We knew this was a Midwestern concept—we looked in Chicago, KC, Indy, but we like the site in Omaha best. We feel Florida is a good fit. We want to prove it in different parts of the country. The Northeast is next.”

What’s the endgame? Spinoff and sell as Parasole did with Bucca and Oceanaire? Kam is noncommittal. “I’ve built a lot of businesses... the goal is to continue to build. When the passion runs out, then we’ll think about alternatives.”

Crave’s decision to move into and blow up (via a rooftop deck) the Palomino space in downtown Minneapolis is a sea change. The location has many assets, but downtown is the antithesis of a mall. Downtown restaurants are largely destination restaurants. “We understand that,” Kam notes, “so



“It’s important to show your face and let your employees and customers know you care. I try to make a connection with them every day.”

—Kam Talebi

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"I was nothing but a foodie. I am very uncomfortable in a Cheesecake Factory. I got hate mail when I came over to this company, but Kam and Keyvan want respect from foodies."

-Jim Kyndberg

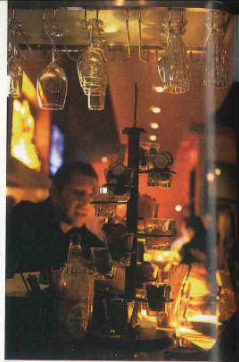
there will be slightly higher finishes, richer fabrics; it will feel edgier. It will be a multi-million-dollar build-out. There will be some overlap with our suburban customers, but there will be new ones."

Those new ones may be looking for an upgraded food experience. One you might assume was not available at Crave—with its focus on safe harbor dishes and mainstream sushi for suburban mall customers. You might be mistaken.

In early 2010 Crave hired Jim Kyndberg, who had closed his foodie temple, Bayport Cookery, the previous year. Kyndberg was planning to start a food truck when a mutual acquaintance introduced him to Kam Talebi. "I don't know what I'd do with a guy like you," Kam told me," Kyndberg recalls. "Can you see yourself working here?" He could and did.

"Jim and JP are here for deliberate reasons," Kam explains. "We wanted to create a different type of dining experience. They bring a creative side that complements the core of what we do."

Kyndberg does not cook at any of the Craves, but he evaluates operations and works with their kitchen staffs on culinary



skills; he develops recipes in concert with longtime executive chef Eli Wollenzien. Kyndberg made his mark last September with more than 50 recipe changes to the Crave menu. "How we season meats, how we make stocks... it was about elevating



food standards, sometimes in subtle ways. "I was nothing but a foodie," Kyndberg insists. "I am very uncomfortable in a Cheesecake Factory. I got hate mail when I came over to this company, but Kam and Keyvan want respect from foodies. They are

sophisticated guys, and they eat out at nice restaurants. They want to set themselves apart from the competition."

Kyndberg is sourcing locally and buying from family farms, but he has seen the limits of what is possible. "We would destroy most small local farms with our buying needs. There isn't enough supply out there to serve us."

"Crave is a machine, no doubt, but we don't open many cans or Cryovac bags. I don't make my own veal stock, but we buy a great one." He uses Atlantic salmon to illustrate the compromises in the format. "I'd never use it at Bayport. I know what good salmon tastes like," Kyndberg says. "But we don't get complaints on our salmon. So when I wanted to add wild Alaskan salmon or BC salmon, at 25 to 40 percent more cost... that battle I lost."

Kyndberg produces a monthly menu for the Crave Cares program, a special menu whose proceeds support a different local charity each month. It is the most foodie aspect of the Crave operation and hews closest to Kyndberg's slow food ideals. But it was Kam's idea.

CRAVING GROWTH

FEBRUARY 2007
Crave Galleria opens

APRIL 2009
Crave Mall of America

NOVEMBER 2009
Crave West End

MARCH 2010
Crave Midtown Crossing (Omaha)

SEPTEMBER 2010
Crave Orlando

FEBRUARY 2011
Urban Eatery

MARCH 2011
Sopranos

MAY 2011
Crave Minneapolis

SUMMER 2011
Crave Coral Gables (Miami)

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"I'm a city guy, but for me it's a chance to *build something, get on the ground floor of something that's growing.*"

-JP Samuelson

"Crave Cares allows us to connect in the community," Kam explains. "We develop the menu, promote the organization's cause, and deliver the proceeds. The menus are a little edgier, outside our comfort zone, but it's in line with what we are about: caring about people, caring about our employees, doing good."

Kyndberg's locavore ethos notwithstanding, the Talebis' approach to values is refreshingly old school. They talk not about farmers, sustainability, or healing the earth, but instead about creating a family atmosphere as employers and with their customers. Doing right within their immediate circle before they save the world.

It's nonetheless a tall, perhaps even naive, order at a growing multi-unit, multi-state operation. "It's our upbringing, it's who we are," says Keyvan. "We've been taught that: Be compassionate."

"If we're doing our jobs right," explains Kam, "hopefully that carries over to your table." ■



Food Forward: URBAN EATERY AND SOPRANOS

AFTER FOUR YEARS of tweaking and replication, the Talebi brothers busted out two new concepts this winter. Uptown's Urban Eatery and Sopranos at the West End. The two have very different histories and trajectories.

Urban Eatery is likely a one-off, a reinvention of the soulless View at Calhoun Beach Club. Keyvan and Kam were silent partners in the restaurant with friends and family, but the concept lost its edge. "We could either continue as passive investors or bring our know-how to it," Kam says. "The location is not suited to a Crave—it's neighborhood, more urban, affluent."

The gleaming View has been softened with lots of distressed wood, mood lighting, and classic rock music. The back bar is gone, though the front bar with its high-tops, booths, and TVs remains. Jim Kyndberg has created a menu of elevated comfort foods (smoked duck nachos, bison pot roast) that suit a trade area with everything from young families to seniors to singles. The restaurant feels slightly slick, a little calculated, but it has a warmth that is a refreshing change for a space that had largely become a drinking joint for young singles on the make.

Up Highway 100 in the old Ringo space at West End is the Talebis' bigger play, Sopranos, an Italian steak house concept that Kam has been gestating for some time. The decision to hire JP Samuelson to birth its culinary side immediately sets it up as a concept to watch—not just for its revenue potential, but for its food.

"Kam wants the place to be food-driven," Samuelson says. "I'm a city guy, but for me it's a chance to build something, get on the ground floor of something that's growing. Solera was a mature concept. This won't be the last thing Kam is going to do."

Sopranos is clearly national concept number two for the brothers, and they see in Samuelson the partner to make the food work. "JP understands simplicity, he understands our customer, he understands the contributors to success," Kam explains, "because he ran his own restaurant."

Which is the common denominator in why both Kyndberg and Samuelson, two foodie chefs, are working for Kam. As Kyndberg explains it, "We've signed the front of checks as well as the back. We got that it's a business as well." Sopranos opens March 28.



"JP understands simplicity, he understands our customer, he understands the contributors to success because *he ran his own restaurant.*"

-Kam Talebi

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