

The entrepreneur looking to create a chain of Italian restaurants across Wales

A young entrepreneur has plans to build an Italian restaurant empire in Wales.

Andreas Christou, 27, has big ambitions as he gears up to open his latest and fourth restaurant Casa Bianca restaurant in Merthyr, at the end of September.

“Our dream is to be one of the biggest Italian chains in South Wales, that’s the ambition,” he said.

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Mr Christou owns and operates the popular Casa Bianca restaurant and cocktail bar in Abergavenny and La Piccola Italia in Monmouth.

He opened a third Casa Bianca site in Pontypridd earlier this month and is now opening a fourth branch located on the corner of Glebeland Street and High Street in Merthyr Tydfil.

“We chose to go with the Casa Bianca brand because it has taken off in Abergavenny,” he said. “That’s going to be the brand for all the restaurants.”

Originally from Cyprus, Mr Christou has worked in the hospitality trade since he was ten years old when he first began washing dishes in a restaurant kitchen after school.

With an Italian godfather, the ambitious young restaurateur then travelled to Sorrento, Italy in his teens where he learnt to cook Italian cuisine before becoming head chef at a four rosette restaurant in Bristol.

“I know the restaurant trade inside and out,” said Mr Christou. “It’s like I’ve got forty years experience when I’m only 27.”

In 2016, he came to Wales and opened La Piccola Italia with his two best friends before expanding with the Casa Bianca restaurant in Abergavenny in 2018.

The first two restaurants have been a great success among locals in the town with each site turning over between £1.2 million and £1.5 million a year.

Mr Christou says they will serve around 350 customers at each restaurant on a Monday alone.

“Since opening in 2018, Casa Bianca in Abergavenny has developed a particularly loyal, tight-knit customer base – many of whom regularly travel to dine with us from Merthyr Tydfil,” he said.



The Casa Bianca restaurant in Abergavenny

Mr Christou is now hoping to have similar success in Merthyr Tydfil with the aim of making around £1.5 to £1.8 million turnover a year. At the smaller Pontypridd premises, he's looking at reaching a turnover between £500,000 and £800,000.

But the ambitious entrepreneur says he is reinvesting the majority of revenue into growing the chain.

"I might turn over £1.5m but only make a £300,000 profit because I am reinvesting all the time. I'm not taking many

dividends. I'm thinking of the long run and I think Merthyr will be extremely successful," he said.

Construction work is now underway at the Merthyr restaurant and, once open, it will employ 15 to 18 people. Mr Christou plans to open an adjoining cocktail bar in the town next year employing a further 10 staff.

The new venture was made possible by funding from the Welsh Government's Transforming Towns Placemaking scheme, with support from the Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.

The restaurateur received a business development grant of £250,000 from Business Wales to support the expansion which the business had to match.

"I'm very excited for the Merthyr opening. We get hundreds of customers coming from Merthyr visiting our Abergavenny branch so that's why we've decided to open in Merthyr," he said.

Leader of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, Cllr Geraint Thomas, said: "It's great to see another fan-favourite restaurant open in the town centre, and I have no doubt that Casa Bianca will be just as popular here as it is in Abergavenny.

"Andreas Christou is the latest business owner to benefit from Council funding, with his personal ambition – alongside the many other local entrepreneurs we've helped – feeding directly into our long-term masterplan for the town.

"Supporting entrepreneurs in this way is a majorly important step in helping us to further grow a culture of great independent businesses and unique food and drink offerings in Merthyr Tydfil – all while bringing a newfound purpose to empty buildings in the town centre."

However, while the business has been going from strength to strength with growth and expansion, the restaurateur is facing

the same cost of doing business challenges as others in the hospitality industry.

“I’ve never seen it so bad. Every single product has gone through the roof,” said Mr Christou about how inflation has impacted the cost of ingredients and wages.

“Alcohol has gone up by 6%. Soft drinks by 3-4%. The cost of fish has increased by 7-8%. Meat has gone up by 130% as well,” he added.

The cost of building work and materials which have gone into opening the third and fourth branches has also tripled.

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Staff retention has also been hugely challenging for the hospitality business.

“It is hard to find new staff especially since the pandemic,” said Mr Christou. “A lot of people haven’t come back to the hospitality industry.”

“We offer a lot of jobs for local staff as well as bringing staff from Italy. But it’s become a lot harder now because of Brexit. A lot of the rules have changed and a lot of people went back.

“It’s very hard now to find people as quickly as before but we’re getting a lot of support from the business development team in Merthyr with hiring staff in the town.”

But Mr Christou said he has managed to keep a team of staff throughout the crisis.

“We’ve kept the same team for a number of years, including all our Italian chefs and waiters,” he said, adding that the business offers staff incentives to boost performance.

“When we open a new place, the restaurant manager and head chef have six months to run it and meet certain targets. If they meet the targets and keep to our standards then they each start getting 10% of all the site’s profits.

“I don’t want to be one of those restaurateurs where all the money comes to me. I want to share it with the staff and give them something to work towards. That’s why I’ve been able to expand and keep the staff for so long.

“A lot of people see the hospitality industry as a dead end career with unsociable hours or something to do before they go to university. I’m trying to change people’s outlook on it and see it as an opportunity and a career.”

Overall, Mr Christou is remaining optimistic about the challenges facing the industry and economy.

“It doesn’t scare me that we’re going into a recession. I think if you’re offering good food and good service then people will go out to eat and support you.

“It’s a situation where it’s better to get on with it and focus on the future. We’re successful but it is hard, things have gone up in price but it’s not going to be like this forever.”

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