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The Apple Tastes Good Australians Flourish In One Of The World's Greatest Cities

By Luke Collins

LESS than three years ago, Australian Nick Mathers sold his beach house north of Sydney and found himself in New York, jobless but enjoying himself mightily. Later this month, he meets his new business partner -- fashion designer Ralph Lauren. "I came over here just on a holiday," Mathers says. "I met some really crazy people that were quite influential and I got a bit starstruck by a few things -- there was a lot of pretty girls and I thought, 'I could stay here'."

So he did. In November 2003, Mathers and fellow Australian Lincoln Pilcher opened Ruby's, a coffee shop in Manhattan's bustling Nolita (North of Little Italy) district. In the process, the men have become characters in a popular tale: the New York success story. "They love Australians and it's a huge market and I thought, 'You could really make money here'," Mathers says. "I started thinking and you couldn't get decent coffee, so at first (Ruby's) was a coffee shop. What we have now is a restaurant."

What Mathers and Pilcher also have is a growing business. After some Ralph Lauren executives became Ruby's fans -- lured, perhaps, by Bondi burgers and decent coffee -- they proposed a partnership that will see restaurants within the fashion label's new Rugby stores. The first "Rugby Cafe" opens in Georgetown, the affluent Washington, DC suburb. Several more will follow, and Mathers can't quite believe that later this month he will meet Lauren himself, one of the world's iconic designers. "It's an accumulation of luck and being in the right place at the right time, although the harder you work the luckier you seem to be," he says. "If it continues the way it is, I'll either have a nervous breakdown or I'll be making a lot of money. Perhaps both."

While Australians have always come to America within large companies, more and more are eyeing New York City as entrepreneurs. The men behind fashion label Tsubi, Dan Single and George Gorrow, have a Manhattan store, while former banker Elizabeth Charles has a Greenwich Village boutique specialising in Australian and New Zealand fashion. Former commodities trader Tracey Frost Rensky co-founded a swank members only playhouse for children, while former Booz Allen Hamilton consultant Michele Anderson's The Wine Angel distributes boutique Australian wines in the US.

They represent a fraction of the Australians doing business in one of the world's most dynamic cities. For all of them, the appeal is obvious: the market is huge. For example, Anderson says the wine market in New York City alone is larger than Australia's, meaning even modest success can be fabulously rewarding. "You only need one significant relationship to have a serious business established," says Anderson, who came to the US in 1991 to study at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. The Wine Angel ascended when she tapped Wharton's alumni network, discovering the owner of New York City's biggest wine wholesaler was also one of the school's graduates. A deal was done and the business took off.

“This is really a business where all of my personal objectives are in alignment with my professional objectives,” Anderson says. “I wake up and think, ‘This is the business I’ll do forever.’”

Experts believe the number of Australians living and working in the US will increase due to the introduction of a new visa, the E-3. It was introduced last year specifically for Australians and allows anyone with a university degree and a job offer to work in the United States. Some 10,500 are available annually.

“It’s the Australian ticket to America,” says Elena Douglas, the chief executive of networking group Advance -- Australian Professionals in America, an arm of the Australian Consul-General in New York. “That is different to the old scenario. “People used to ring Advance and say, ‘I want to come and work in America, how do I do that?’ and we used to say, ‘It’s pretty bloody hard.’ You almost just couldn’t do it.” Take-up of the new visa has been relatively slow, surprising some observers. However, Douglas believes it will “take time for Australians to realise that this is now as accessible a market as London”.

Going to London -- the traditional destination for overseas-bound Australians -- was an option for Damon Gorrie, now the director of international markets of Communicator Interactive. Founded in Sydney in 1999, Communicator Interactive develops marketing campaigns for mobile telephones using text messaging and other technologies.

With sales in Australia quickly growing to more than \$10 million annually, Gorrie wanted to expand internationally. “It would have been easy for me to go to London just because of the market opportunity, the clients we have in Europe. It probably would have made more sense,” says Gorrie, who flew to New York City from Australia monthly for six months before moving in September last year. “But I’ve always wanted to live in New York, in Manhattan, and a six-hour flight for me to go to London is a walk in the park compared to what I was doing before. And it works with my type of lifestyle.”

As a 30-year-old, single, self-confessed party lover, New York City is perfect for him. Gorrie says the market for Communicator Interactive is also relatively young as mobile technologies such as text messaging are only just taking off in the US. “It’s today where Australia was two-and-a-half years ago,” he says. “For a major western market, it’s a big opportunity here.”

Indeed, parts of Manhattan are booming: Mathers calls Ruby’s Nolita neighborhood “the new St Kilda”. However, he also points out that all Australians enjoy a great safety net if everything turns pear-shaped. “You can always go home,” he says.

Caption: Former Booz Allen Hamilton consultant Michele Anderson now distributes Australian wine.

Luke Collins’ new book, *Away Game: Australians in American Boardrooms*, is published by Wiley Books. Suggested Retail \$29.95

