

Darth Kitchens aims to build SA's largest 'virtual kitchen' network

Darth Kitchens, a new dark kitchen operation by some of the brightest minds in SA's food space, has launched its first 400sqm purpose-built, state-of-the-art facility in Cape Town. Also known as a 'ghost kitchen', 'virtual kitchen' or 'cloud kitchen', Darth Kitchens is a delivery-only establishment that can only be accessed via food delivery apps like UberEats, Mr D and Orderin.



Some of SA's most successful entrepreneurs are involved in Darth Kitchens. Pictured from left: Manuel Koser, co-founder and director, Silvertree Investments; Heini Booysen, CEO Darth Kitchens; and David Torr, UCook CEO and co-founder.

Some of the brands that Cape Town customers can already try include Buddy's Burgers, Fluent (Health Bowls), Bagels Shmagels, Anvil Burger Co and Ringo's NY Style Pizzeria.

With the goal of becoming SA's largest dark kitchen network, Darth Kitchens has already secured seed capital in excess of R5m to date with a further R30m planned to rapidly scale the model over the next few years.

Disrupting the traditional restaurant model

Darth Kitchens founder and CEO, Heini Booysen says that the explosive popularity of food delivery apps is creating a disruptive opportunity in the traditional restaurant space.

“The key is that Darth Kitchens does not cater for sit-in diners which means that they we’re able to dramatically reduce overheads in comparison to traditional restaurants. It also lets us focus on important elements like packaging and the delivery experience.”



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16 Feb 2018



Dark kitchens may be emerging in South Africa but is not a new concept, with global delivery apps like Deliveroo launching these kitchens in the UK as far back as 2017, the trend has had some time to gain momentum globally. Recently however this concept is experiencing increased interest from venture capital companies and food tech investors driven largely by players like Uber’s founder, Travis Kalanick.

Kalanick raised more than \$400m for his aggressive move into the dark kitchen space across the US, India, and China and Kitchen United raised more than \$40 million from Google Ventures to grow their dark kitchen network across the US.

Booyesen says that his experience as co-founder of one of SA’s first food delivery apps, Orderin, means that’s he’s well-aware of the opportunity that the dark kitchen trend offers.

“For the most part, restaurants think of takeaways as an afterthought. You can order the best Thai curry in town for delivery but then it arrives in a Styrofoam box and plastic bag, probably spilt in the bag because it was badly sealed. Years of listening to unhappy customers made me realise that there is an opportunity for creating quality food optimised for delivery.”



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Brains behind the brand

The Darth Kitchens founding team comprises senior restaurant operations specialists hailing from large national restaurant chains as well as executive chefs from some of South Africa’s best restaurants like The Test Kitchen and Thali. In addition, UCook co-founder David Torr will be offering his experience in direct-to-consumer food brands to the team.

"The dark kitchen model marks the next big evolutionary step in the food and beverage industry, giving consumers access to cuisine variety and selection on-demand like never before. The beauty of the business model lies in its agility with cuisine interchanges and alterations made on the fly based on customer preference," says Torr.



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Silvertree Holdings co-founder and director Manuel Koser says that the investment in the dark kitchen concept is in line with the investment company’s new strategy, launched in early 2019.

“Silvertree focuses on developing disruptive consumer brands in Africa using technology with clear differentiators. We have followed the dark kitchen concept for a while and believe that Darth Kitchens will be able to develop exceptional consumer-

facing food brands that will be leaders in their respective categories. We anticipate significant growth in this vertical and our strategy is to become the market leader.”

Darth Kitchens has already launched various cuisine types sourcing both local and sustainable ingredients and aiming for recycled or plastic-free packaging across their brands. “We’re offering customers a quality product at an affordable price. It’s quality that South Africans rarely see from fast food brands, and we believe they’ll notice the difference from their very first order,” says Booysen.

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