

“We want it to be perfect”

When Elena Mackey and Rachel Munro Peebles decided to open a nursery, they were determined to create a setting like no other, as Nursery Business discovered...

Elena Mackey and Rachel Munro Peebles aren't obvious business partners. Look at their backgrounds and you'll find little to link them. In a wide-ranging career, Elena has spent 20 years living in the Middle East working for the likes of Citibank, acquired a degree in business and studied childcare, counselling and Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Rachel, by contrast, is a graduate of the Chelsea School of Art, a former PR girl for Harvey Nichols, and runs a property development business based in Shoreditch. But a chance meeting at the school gates has led them to the early years sector, and a particularly ambitious take on the traditional nursery model.

For both nursery ownership is a fresh challenge – a vocation in which they are still finding their feet – but unfamiliarity hasn't diluted their vision, or dampened their determination to offer local parents and their children the best early years education and care. Their setting, the 45-place Fount Nursery in Hackney (fountnursery.com), is like no other you'll have seen before: boasting a unique

vintage-inspired interior, situated in an arch under a railway bridge, neighboured by a slow-cooking Northern Italian restaurant and deli, set at the heart of lifestyle family destination Fount London (fountlondon.com), for which the partnership is also responsible. There have been challenges aplenty to overcome in the six months since it opened its doors, but with places filling up fast, Elena and Rachel are confident in their formula, and are already planning for the future.

EAT, SHOP, PLAY

“I moved to the area three-and-a-half years ago,” Elena says, as we sit down in Il Cudega, the aforementioned Italian restaurant, to talk about Fount London's beginnings. “Rachel was the first mum I met in the playground at our daughters' school. I just went over and said, ‘Hi, I'm new – I think our two girls are in the same class.’ We had a coffee here, a coffee there, talked about what we wanted, what we do. And then this all evolved.”

“Elena wanted to open a nursery and had come across this site,” Rachel explains. “When she showed it to me I thought it was amazing. I'd had this family destination concept in mind for years, a place for parents to meet, somewhere we could create a sense of community. I suggested we take on the three arches there are here, and the space outside.” And just like that, Fount London was born.

Their vision for Fount London is encapsulated in its ‘Eat, Play, Shop’ tag-line: alongside Il Cudega and Fount Nursery there's a pop-up shop space, occupied on a rotating basis by local businesses. “The idea is that parents can drop their children off, buy something in the pop-ups, and then sit down for some



food and coffee,” Rachel says. “Fount London is the mother of the project, and Fount Nursery is the heart – that's how we see it.”

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Elena's desire to open a nursery stemmed from a recognition that local parents were struggling to find the high-quality early years provision they needed to return to work. “I listened to mums, spoke to them at my daughter's school,” she says. “I realised there was a huge lack of childcare, and that most of what was available wasn't good.”

For Rachel, that was a familiar story: “When I was looking for childcare, the places I went to, you just wouldn't have put your children in,” she says. “We decided we weren't going to cut corners, and that we would deliver something that was true to parents in Hackney.”

This meant creating an environment, and an atmosphere, in tune with parents' sensibilities, as well as one that



Running your own business is really difficult – you have to eat, sleep and breathe it.



supported children's learning. While you should never judge a book by its cover, or a nursery by its aesthetics alone, it's impossible not to be impressed by Fount Nursery's interior. Its open-plan layout, palette of natural colours and selection of vintage furniture and resources manages simultaneously to be both calming and stimulating to children, and appealing to mums and dads. "When Elena said she wanted to open a nursery, I said, 'I'll deliver you something completely unique,'" Rachel tells us. "Hackney has an amazing diversity – we have creatives, writers, artists, bankers, and in their houses they have an eclectic mix of antiques and modern art, and that's what we've replicated. We've also steered away from bright colours as much as we can – children don't like them, so why do nurseries use them?"

The result of Rachel's efforts affords Fount an instantly recognisable point of difference to its competition, too, a point that isn't lost on its owners: "With the

interior, with our brand, we're trying to create our own niche within the nursery sector," Rachel sums up their thinking.

WAITING FOR OFSTED

Opening a nursery is never a simple undertaking, and the challenge is amplified if you have never done it before. Even having invested in ongoing support from well-respected consultant Laura Henry (laurahenryconsultancy.com), Elena and Rachel have encountered pitfalls, which they've hurdled with varying degrees of success. The most frustrating, and costly, of these appeared just as Fount Nursery was ready to open its doors, as Ofsted's mandatory registration visit failed to materialise.

"They could have come in at any time – they have 25 weeks to do the registration visit after you complete the application," Elena explains. "Everybody was telling us 'they'll be with you really

ON GETTING PLANNING PERMISSION...

"The arches had just been renovated when we acquired them – prior to that they'd been garages," Rachel explains. "But we were delayed by a year, because they were B1 units and planning didn't want to lose the office space. We literally went down to Hackney Council, stood in the foyer and said, 'We're not leaving until you say yes – this area needs a nursery,' and in the end we persuaded them.

"We finally got the building in May 2015, and then the builders took about three months to turn it around, so it was ready by mid-August."

fast', so we were ready to rock and roll in the first week of September... Then we spent two months doing lots of open days, with parents asking, 'When are you opening?' It was quite embarrassing, actually. But we still had to sell the places, let people know that we were here - that we were going to be opening soon. I was on Ofsted's back on a weekly basis.

"They finally came on October 20th. Even then, a week later, we still couldn't open because we had to wait for them to post out our registration certificate - I said 'Can't you send a scan to me?!' because we had people wanting to start. We finally opened the nursery on the 26th, having been paying for staff, rent, insurance..."

"We were haemorrhaging - that's the term I use," Rachel says, "and we lost a lot of parents because of that, because they needed places in September. It was difficult."

COMMITTED TO QUALITY

Despite the delays, Fount Nursery quickly won parents over - and that's not just because of the positive first impression its appearance guarantees. Elena and Rachel have consciously positioned their setting as a premium provider going above and beyond for discerning mums and dads, and are pulling out all the stops to deliver high standards of early education and care.

While it has proved a time-consuming and often frustrating process, recruiting skilled staff has been at the heart of their efforts. All but one of their practitioners can boast of a Level 3 qualification, but many hold degrees as well. The team



ON RECRUITMENT...

"We've had to learn a few lessons, as interviewing was new to both of us," Elena says of what is an ongoing recruitment process. "Some of the applicants come across as amazing in their interview, but then don't deliver. We've also had quite a number of staff who sadly didn't have a Level 3 - you just know that they'd be amazing, but sadly you can't have them.

"For us, having passion is really important, not just qualifications - and we do a trial morning so we can see whether or not applicants have the initiative to apply what they know to the workplace, and deliver every day, with children in situ."

already includes a qualified primary school teacher, well equipped to support children as they approach the transition to primary school, and a Montessori-trained specialist. But it doesn't stop there - the setting can also call upon the talents of Kerryann Dunlop, a Fifteen-trained (fifteen.net) Jamie Oliver chef, who both prepares children's meals and leads them in their culinary-based learning.

Needless to say, this kind of expertise costs money, but funds have also been found to offer parents a fully inclusive service: nappies, wipes, creams and milk; a wide range of extra-curricular activities



such as Baby Sensory, Stretch yoga and forest school; and regular visits to local museums are all included in the setting's fees. Adding to the expense, ingredients for the children's meals are sourced from local traders – a decision made to both ensure quality and support the local community. That all this is being achieved despite a recent reduction in the nursery's fees (see panel) is an impressive feat.

Elena and Rachel admit that their commitment to this quality of provision has an impact on their bottom line, and that they continue to review their

approach with an eye on making savings. But they are adamant that any changes they make will not impact the quality of the experience children receive. "We could cut corners, cut the classes and other things, and we'd still be full because there's a shortage of nursery places here, but we don't want to do that," Elena says.

"It's not only about money," Rachel explains. "Our profit margin is smaller than it could be, but we're delivering something unique and that means we have more credibility. We want it to be perfect on every level because this is something we believe in."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Some nursery owners prefer to adopt a hands-off approach to managing their settings, but although Elena and Rachel have recently taken the decision to step back and employ a manager to oversee the day-to-day running of Fount Nursery, they are still often on site or close by, and always busy. Elena continues to take responsibility for show-rounds and regularly observes her team's practice from an office that conveniently looks out onto the nursery's two base rooms. "The parents love that we're on site, that we're parents too and that we understand their needs," Rachel points out.

Even after the children have gone home, the hard work goes on – as Rachel puts it, "Running your own business is really difficult – you have to eat, sleep and breathe it."

"It's never-ending," Elena admits. "There are parents emailing at 10 o'clock at night..."

You could forgive them for wanting to stick with what they've got, but just halfway through their first year as nursery owners, and still awaiting their first Ofsted inspection, Elena and Rachel already have an eye on growing a business – a brand – that they feel has the potential to attract parents across London and beyond. At the same time both are conscious of the need to build on strong foundations: "We'll only look to grow when this nursery is watertight," Rachel says. "This has to work first, to give us the confidence to open up a second site."

"We're still learning," Elena agrees. "We don't claim to be perfect or anything – we've got to wait for that day!"

ON SETTING FEES...



"We started off at a premium level," Rachel says, "because we thought that London parents were able to pay it, looking at Islington, parts of the city... But we realised that was stopping us filling up as fast as we'd hoped. Parents told us, 'we absolutely love it, but we can't afford you'. We made the decision to drop our fees in March, and all of a sudden, that was it. Now we're only slightly more expensive than the market rate, but have a waiting list already..."

THE OWNERS



ELENA MACKAY

"We do get emails from parents, saying

'job well done' or 'this is a concern'; and if it's the latter, we're on it. We're not behind the scenes, we're there."



RACHEL MUNRO PEEBLES

"It's an amazing thing we've

created here. It's such hard work, but when a parent says their child has had an amazing time, that they love dropping him off, that makes it all worthwhile."