

Work Hard, Play Harder

The Musing Life of Mikayel Israyelyan

Mikayel Israyelyan once had everything taken away. He's now getting it all back — and then some.

Text **Manouk Akopyan** | Photo **Tigran Tovmasyan**



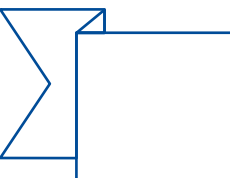


Handheld sparklers, a blast of confetti and the horn of an 18-wheeler reverberate through the air as an army of cocktail waitresses deliver bottles of tequila, vodka, champagne and every complementing mixer and chaser to Mikayel Israyelyan's private VIP booth at the Playhouse Nightclub. The day is Friday the 13th but just like every other extraordinary Friday, it is an action-packed one for the owner of Playhouse. The time has come. Everyone is dancing wildly, immersed in the electronic music. Scantly dressed contortionists in suspended cages are bending their bodies like Cirque acrobats. It is past midnight and the club is in its climactic stage of euphoria. Surrounded by family, friends and colleagues, Mike settles in as the bottles of bubbly begin to pop, one after another. Fist-pumpers are boogying down with excitement, validating the notion that

When it comes to growth and expansion, his brain relentlessly fires on all cylinders. He no longer has to secretly use his father's name to open up businesses, as was the case with the theater stand in Yerevan. Before he finishes one thought, he jumps to another as he remembers the new club space he bought in San Diego, and the other restaurant in Beverly Hills, and . . . When it comes to the prospects of investing, the word "no" is not in his vocabulary. He treats restaurants and his other surrounding businesses in the greater Los Angeles area as if he were Rich Uncle Pennybags playing a game of Monopoly. He even occasionally pulls off wearing a pair of suspenders stylishly – minus the ridiculous mustache and walking cane, of course. In terms of monopolization, picture this. On Hollywood Boulevard, he owns Playhouse, rated by Reuters as the

In 2007, Israyelyan got hands-on by developing his \$3-million baby Romanov, a Russian restaurant that easily doubles as a fortress. As you drive up along Ventura, especially at night, Romanov dominates the Studio City skyline like a Las Vegas resort. Walking inside, you are captivated with the fabergé-esque ambiance – which Israyelyan designed himself – including hand-carved chairs and curtains sprinkled with 24-karat gold. A custom Yerevan-made gold-plated chandelier overpowers the main dining room floor with framed televisions along the wall that switch from one iconic painting to another. A large stage playing live entertainment complements the theater-style dining room, giving the air of an opulent night at the Tsar's winter palace. Romanov started off on a sour note, however, when the surrounding community feared the restaurant would be used as a glorified mob hangout.

Romanov dominates the skyline like a Las Vegas resort. Walking inside, you are captivated with the rococo ambiance, giving the air of an opulent night at the Tsar's winter palace.



Mike is the luckiest guy in Hollywood. If there was ever a blueprint for a business proprietor, Mikayel Israyelyan could be the perfectly sculpted mold. He's been building his destiny ever since he was a teenager in Yerevan. In 1991, while other adolescents his age were playing soccer, shooting marbles and fetching bread for the family dinner, Israyelyan separated himself from the pack and opened a theater café in his native Yerevan. Although he was only selling simple pastries, soft drinks and fruit, the ambitious 14 year-old was making 150 rubles a day during a time when the country was suffering famine and instability after the collapse of communism. That was then. Flash forward 21 years. With more past, present and future businesses and projects than most could keep up with, Israyelyan is still very much in touch with his capitalist side, as he likes to call it.

No. 4 nightclub in the world. Standing to its left is Joe's Pizza, the New York pizza brand which he joined as a partner. To its right is the new Calle Tacos, a trendy Mexican restaurant equipped with a taco truck inside serving gourmet street food. About 50 yards down the block is the headquarters for his Muse Lifestyle Group, the umbrella to his business empire. On Ventura Boulevard – the Hollywood Boulevard of the San Fernando Valley – he's built Romanov and Chi Dynasty on top of each other, and has the chic café Charlie's Pantry two units down. "I love developing and creating new places that can be appreciated. It's an art for me," he says from the confines of the two-story home he designed. "I like being able to do different things. It keeps life interesting, and that's how I feel alive. I always have to do something new, to create, because when I do just one thing, I get tired."

There was even a propagandist campaign dubbed "The Russians Are Coming." To further establish his commitment and good intentions with the community, Israyelyan moved his family to a house that is now a one-minute walk from the property. In the time it takes you to decide which combination of *zakuski* (appetizers) to order, he can stroll to and from work. To the eyes of his new neighbors, however, he may have looked like the newest hot shot in town when he unknowingly purchased a home that was used as the set of an award-winning TV series. Israyelyan finally understood all this after a sequence of strangers with cameras popped up on his front lawn at an alarming rate. One day Mike confronted a fanboy thinking he was an undercover protestor from the community, only to find out he had bought the house used to film *Malcolm in the Middle*. ▶

Soon thereafter, the Studio City Business Improvement Association realized his visions and goals were for the betterment of the community, and for the past five years, he's been elected to its board for three consecutive terms.

Situated underneath Romanov is Chi Dynasty, an upscale Chinese restaurant. Israyelyan partnered with owner Jonathan Chi and bought the brand as an alternative to starting a similar establishment from ground zero.

"I want to build a brand which will go all over the country and even conduct projects overseas. I really believe I can take this company to the next level and one day go public." Last year, on its 28th anniversary, Chi Dynasty opened a third location in Glendale's The Americana at Brand. A fourth is already looming on the horizon, among various other Muse projects in Los Angeles, San Diego and Las Vegas. "Other businesses and owners get nervous when a new restaurant opens up next to them," he says. "I get optimistic and I promote the idea."

Israyelyan's three children – Gabriel, David and Eva – dearly look up to their motorcycle-driving father who just as handily pulls off a Tom Ford look when the time is right.

Back at the Playhouse Nightclub, everyone is walking by with puzzled looks on their faces asking, "Who is this guy with the suede jacket owning the moment like a boss?" Not everyone knows the business savvy and brains behind the full-blown Sin City ambiance Israyelyan has created with Playhouse smack dab in the heart of Hollywood. Minutes before he moves to his booth, a newly-hired security guard confronts Mike as he tries to walk on-stage for a picture. "Who are you?" asks the defensive guard. "I'm the owner," he nonchalantly replies. "Yeah, right," the guard responds, annoyed. "You can't go up."

Israyelyan casually calls his head of security, and once the message is relayed, the problem is calmly resolved in a matter of seconds. Apologies ensue, as the guard's face turns brighter than Mike's red jacket. It's apparent the low-key Israyelyan has no ego problems as he commends the guard for doing his job properly.

At 35 years-old, Israyelyan is not far removed from his humble beginnings. Before the posh home, luxurious cars and the comfortable life, he had to find his place in society as any ambitious teenager bordering adulthood would. Shortly after his family immigrated to Los Angeles, his father Gabriel's health weakened, forcing Mike to become the breadwinner for his family at the young age of 16. This is when he realized all of Hollywood's glitter is not gold. While attending John Marshall High School, he grew up quickly by working three jobs into the wee hours of the morning. He sold auto parts, installed air conditioning units and valet-parked cars at night and went to class by day, where he met his high school sweetheart, Alina. They married at 20, and with yet another person to provide for, it was time to make a move. While parking cars at the Troubador, Mike's ambitions of owning his own restaurant and club grew even stronger. After selling his newly-purchased supplies business, he

went all-in with his savings and opened the Hollywood restaurant Vesuvius at the tender age of 21. He instantaneously became one of Hollywood's youngest restaurant owners.

"I had my mind set on getting married at a young age. My grandfather used to say 'Whoever gets married early and gets up early in the morning always wins.' I didn't want anything to stop in my life, neither my family to stop my business or my business to stop my family. Considering my age and experience, Vesuvius was a very big operation. I came into this business by taking a huge risk."

Hard labor and even harder times pushed Israyelyan to gain the drive and motivation to succeed, he says. And Israyelyan didn't do too badly for himself considering he didn't even know the names of the cocktails he was serving to customers in his first years as owner, operator and manager,

learning the restaurant business on the fly. After his "education," he then transformed Vesuvius into Bliss, and re-invested \$5-million into Republic in the same location when a fire ravaged the previous property. After the turn of the 21st century, he successfully dabbled in other businesses – among them Prana Café, Oasis Bakery and Café, Russian Tea Room and Café, Divine Limousine Services. But Republic remained the crème de le crème and established itself as a premiere nightlife destination. Then he lost it all. In 2009, he was involved in a lawsuit and lost Republic when the landlord successfully prevailed in an unlawful detainer claim against him. "They saw a business that was very successful and wanted to do it themselves," he says. "They ended up with the business, but lost millions of dollars in the process because the one thing they didn't understand was that it's not only owning a space, but making the place work with the right management and concept."

A dissatisfied and determined Israyelyan, believing he was extorted, went on to fight the case as a full-time job at the California appellate court level and prevailed when the Court of Appeal ruled that the trial court's ruling was a miscarriage of justice against him. "I enjoyed my victory not because of the financial aspects, but because I was able to validate the idea of my baby," he says. "I've had my share of successes and a lot of failures, and that's what really helped me learn over the years." While he was in this fight of his life, Israyelyan says, "I stopped and said 'I cannot just go after this and miss out on all of these other opportunities' and that's how the idea of Playhouse came about." In 2009, Israyelyan partnered up with New York-based businessman Rob Vinokur and unleashed the \$6-million beast in Playhouse. The sprawling electronic dancetropolis caters to A-listers while not forgetting about the everyday clubber. ▶



Muse Lifestyle Group

Based in Los Angeles, Mikayel Israyelyan is a successful entrepreneur, seasoned restaurateur, and a savvy businessman. He is the Chief Executive Officer of Muse Lifestyle Group, a dynamic and cutting-edge lifestyle group that fuses innovation and expertise to deliver some of the most desirable destinations in dining, hospitality

and entertainment. Rob Vinokur is his business partner. Here's a list of some of the notable hot spots and business ventures they are currently involved in: **Present:** Playhouse Nightclub, Romanov, Eva Water, Chi Dynasty (Los Feliz, Studio City), The Americana at Brand in Glendale, Calle Tacos, Charlie's Pantry, Joe's Pizza

Future: Charlie's Pantry (Bellaire, Hancock Park), Chi Dynasty (Tarzana). Recently acquired ownership of The Highlands Nightclub and the space for the old club Element (Hollywood). Secured a lease for a club space in downtown, San Diego, scheduled to open winter 2012.



A revolving door of world-known DJ's such as Tiesto tear down the club every weekend – and on Monday Socials, the only night of its magnitude in Los Angeles.

“Playhouse is about the music, the ambiance and the energy that we've been able to create in the brand,” Israyelyan says.

He appreciates all elements of music and the responsibility of creating an upbeat, safe atmosphere more than the mainstream success.

Although he stays open until 4 a.m., Israyelyan has made it a point for Playhouse to be one of the safest clubs in Los Angeles by keeping very close ties with the police department. Three years removed from its honeymoon stage – a time when most clubs lose their initial steam – Playhouse still remains the foundation of Hollywood Boulevard and draws crowds so large that the LAPD has to direct traffic in the surrounding streets.

documented battles with alcoholism over the years. In 2011, during the Armenian American Chamber of Commerce's Business Awards Gala, Israyelyan was honored as “Businessman of the Year” and Mel Gibson was his dinner guest. Gibson has long been rumored to be a principal figure in a possible film documenting the history of Armenia. In recent months the two have been rehashing the idea, highlighted by a sit down last September at the Gibson residence with Israyelyan, President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan, Artur Janibekyan and Mikael Minasyan.

Israyelyan's end to casual drinking is very simple. He does it to set an example for his three children, Gabriel, 14, David 12, and Eva, 6. He takes them everywhere he goes and is already showing them the ropes of his businesses. They dearly look up to their motorcycle-driving father who just as handily pulls off a Tom Ford look when the time is right. Eva is the princess of the house whose name will soon be known all over the world.

Armenians has immunized our people to any obstacle life may present. We came here having lost everything and started from zero. It is in our nature to persevere.” He credits family values and respect – the same ones he's learned from his father Gabriel, 59, mother Mary, 58, brother Gurgen, 30, and sister Diana, 26 – as the foundation for strength and unity. He and his wife Alina, 33, a law school student, raise their children the same way. Their two boys are old souls who don't play video games and are already contemplating college options. Gabriel wants to be a businessman, “just like my father,” he says. A determined David already has his sights set on being a lawyer and graduating Yale. On a daily basis Mike goes about his work very quietly. He mentions acquisitions and developments only in passing during conversations. He is more interested in talking about family values, respect, culture and the current state of affairs in the United States and Armenia. Everything else will work itself out, he says.

“If I hadn't dreamed about the life I'm living now, I would never be here. There is nothing impossible. If you can dream about it, you can do it. I hustle to make my dreams come true.”

Drinks are now flowing at an uncontrollable pace but Mike is passive. With his left hand, he is playing with his prayer beads. With his right hand, he is sipping a bottle of Evian water. Yes, water. His throat is not parched, nor has he drunk to the dire point where hydration seems to be the only means of survival. On the contrary. This man who has access to enough alcohol to sink a cruise ship doesn't drink or smoke, decisions that were made cold turkey six months ago. The concept and commitment of not mixing pleasure with business is refreshing considering many Hollywood types are walking in and out of rehabs as if they were grocery stores. The fact that he can do it while owning countless clubs, restaurants and other lifestyle and hospitality venues is a testament to his willpower.

The impetus for sobriety came from the most unlikely of sources. It is Mel Gibson, a close friend who has suffered well-

Israyelyan is formally launching Eva Water in Armenia and Russia this year, and North America thereafter. Eva Water is a luxury water brand supplied from Kotayk (Akunk Village) that will find its home in hotels and fine dining outlets. For the last eight years, Israyelyan has been mapping the development of Eva Water on every front. First he came up with the idea, then the name and finally, linking it to his daughter. “It's allowed me to combine my resources and my country's resources together, and to reconnect with my country, family and children. I'm really proud of this venture,” he says. “I feel that as Armenians we can achieve anything in life.”

By manufacturing in Armenia, he is excited to be creating new jobs in his Motherland. He sees a lot of potential in the up and coming youth of the country. “We have such a rich culture and tradition. I want the new generation to be educated and to be a part of building this new world,” he says. “The storied past of

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A dream he foresees in the very distant future is retirement in a lavish home he is building in Yerevan, living in *yerjankustyun* (happiness), he says, the foremost quality he seeks in life. By now, we are wrapping up. The final photos have been taken. We have a brief moment to take a break after a long day. During dinner, I ask: “Where do you see yourself and your businesses in 10 years?” He hesitates to answer. Gabriel chimes in, “you're going to have all the clubs in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, right dad?” Israyelyan takes a drink of water and shrugs, “I might have an empire, and my companies will be public and everything will be just great,” he says with a smile. “Then again, I might not have anything at all.” ■