

ALEXIS TSIELEPIS

Lunch with Gold

AFTER TWO DECADES AS A PROFESSIONAL, THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CHELCO VAT HAS CONCLUDED THAT THE KEY TO SUCCESS IS ALL ABOUT HAVING PASSION FOR WHAT HE DOES, WHETHER THAT MEANS DEALING WITH A TRICKY TAX PROBLEM OR ENTERING A GLOBAL COMPETITION TESTING HIS KNOWLEDGE OF CUBAN CIGARS. HE HAS ALSO DECIDED THAT, IF HE IS TO MAINTAIN HIS COMPANY'S REPUTATION AND STRENGTH, HE NEEDS TO BE ABLE TO RELY ON HIS OWN ABILITIES AND VISION.

By John Vickers

LA BOCA	
Columbia Plaza, Limassol	
LARGE SALAD	€6.50
PINE NUTS	€1.95
SUNDRIED TOMATOES	€1.95
CHICKEN FILLET	€2.25
BOLOGNESE FORNO	€8.95
MINERAL WATER	€1.35
SPARKLING WATER	€2.45
TOTAL	€25.40

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assion' is not a word that most of us would associate with accounting and tax matters but my lunch guest at Limassol's La Boca restaurant takes great pride not only in being passionate in everything he does but also in not conforming with many of the ideas and norms of his profession and society at large. A manager who doesn't believe in teamwork? A family man who puts work first? An active citizen who doesn't care for socialism and isn't entirely convinced by democracy either? Meet Alexis Tsielepis!

If my introduction makes him sound like some kind of ego-driven dictator, bear with me. Tsielepis is a hugely like-

able and intelligent man and he happens to be one of those people who is not afraid to speak his mind and back up his opinions with plenty of reasoned argument. And if there is one quality that characterises him, it is passion. The most recent example of its role in his life occurred last month when he and jewellery designer Raffi der Garabedian won the Habanos World Challenge cigar competition in Havana, Cuba. That's right: Two Cypriots beat the

Cubans in Cuba in the first ever competition of its kind about Cuban cigars. How on earth did that happen?

"Like many people, I used to enjoy a cigar on special occasions," he recalls. "Seven or eight years ago, it was more of an outlet for the stress of my daily routine and it gradually became more frequent. Then I started becoming more interested in issues such as the brands I like, the lengths I prefer, the differences between them, and so on. Once you become a passionate cigar smoker, you discover a whole world that most people aren't aware of."

Knowing his love of Cuban cigars, Tsielepis' wife gave him a trip to Havana as a surprise 40th birthday gift two years ago. "We had an amazing 10 days there," he says, "and I had been wanting to go back ever since. Visiting Cuba is not like going to any another country – it's like time travel to 1940s America. So, when I was told that Habanos was holding an international cigar competition, I was in two minds about what to do: I wanted to go back to Havana but I didn't particularly want to enter the competition because I knew I would have to work really hard!"

In the end, of course, he couldn't resist and he and der Garabedian won the local competition and travelled to Havana to represent Cyprus. He had been right about the work: "There is a database of 2,000 questions, from which 30

would be drawn for Part A of the competition. For Part B, we would be given two cigars with no markings and have to answer four questions about each one before matching a particular cigar with a specific dish and a spirit, presenting the history of the cigar and brand and, basically, showing as much knowledge as possible."

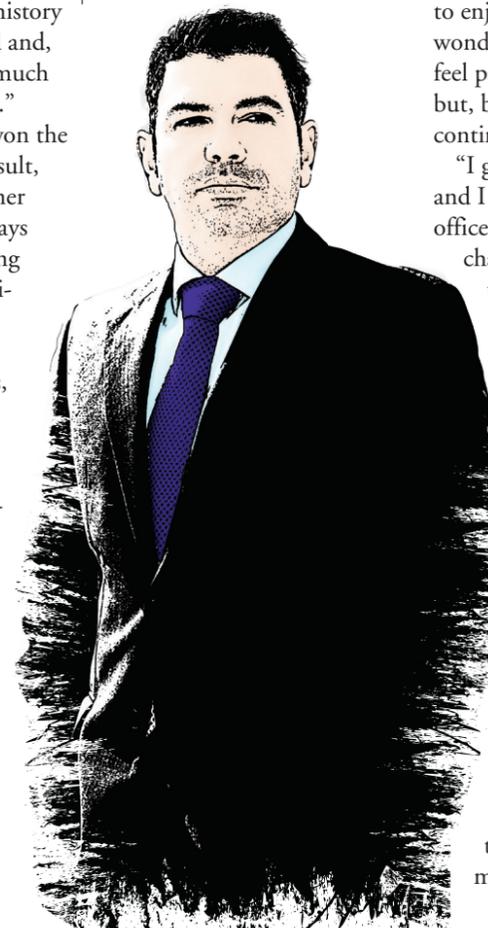
Cuba and Cyprus won the semifinals and, as a result, Tsielepis and his partner spent the next three days in their hotel, preparing and studying for the final. At the end of the event when they were announced as winners, he couldn't believe it and, when he finally understood, he was overcome by the emotion of the moment. "I was in tears!" he admits. "Beating the Cubans in Cuba was really something!"

As a non-smoker who doesn't find anything pleasant about the smell of cigars, I feel obliged to ask my lunch companion a very basic question:

though they are more natural. I smoke moderately, maybe one a day at most and, in the end, I am not so concerned about the damaging effects because I enjoy it. My philosophy is to live and

twin passions. "I am one of the few people in this world to have had the luck or the courage to do something that I really wanted to," he says, explaining how he found something he liked, gave himself to it and continues to enjoy it. "People probably wonder how it's possible to feel passionate about VAT but, believe me, it is!" he continues enthusiastically.

"I get up in the morning and I can't wait to get to the office to start looking at the challenges or problems that will be put in front of me." As managing director of Chelco VAT, he is obliged to spend a lot of time on management and administrative tasks, which he doesn't particularly enjoy. "The downside of being passionate about something is that when you're not doing it, you're not giving your best," he says. "Luckily I can now delegate that work to others and focus on my VAT-related issues."



MY PHILOSOPHY IS TO LIVE AND ENJOY LIFE FOR AS LONG AS I'M HERE

Aren't cigars unhealthy?

"Yes," he replies at once. "I'm not under any illusions about that. Like cigarettes, cigars have tar and nicotine,

enjoy life for as long as I'm here."

From cigars we move on to VAT, which are linked in Alexis Tsielepis' mind as

When I'm dealing with a VAT problem – and there are lots of them because of bad legislation, bad administration, bad compliance

by taxpayers – I just want to be in that world, alone with the problem, the law, the European Court of Justice cases, and deal with it. It's the same with the cigars. The moment I light up, it's as if everything just disappears for a moment. It's just me alone with the cigar. That brief moment is magical.”

He is the first to admit that when the work interests him, he'll give it everything and enjoy every part of it but when he has to do things outside the VAT sphere, he is not as hands-on as he ought to be. “That's why I make a very good team with my brother, who is Managing Director of our auditing firm,” he tells me, “because he is very good at taking on all aspects of the running of the company whereas I just want to deal with tax and especially VAT.”

For someone who recognises his own failings, he is surprisingly sure of his strengths and happily admits that he doesn't believe in Boards of Directors, Committees and joint efforts. “A lot of people place such emphasis on teamwork,” he states, “but I don't. I mean it. History remembers individuals, not groups. I have a great team and I want the people I have chosen for it have a passion for VAT and to share my vision of where I want to take this company. But I'm the one taking the decisions.”

Isn't he worried, I ask, that he may be giving the wrong message to his children?

“Many people have a problem with ego and I understand what they mean when they say it's a bad thing but to me it means belief in yourself,” he replies. “I think it's something to be encouraged. If I didn't believe in

who tend to do what's best for small pockets of people and not for the country as a whole, because they have vested interests.”

Alexis Tsielepis loves his family but he readily admits that he doesn't spend as much time with them as he should. However, unlike most husbands/fathers

and expertise for the position. I would happily offer a position on my Board of Directors to anyone, male or female, who is worth being there but I don't want to feel obliged to put someone simply because there is a quota to fill. Political correctness has a lot to answer for!”

After 20 years of work,

THE NOTION THAT MONEY IS EVIL IS A GREAT MISCONCEPTION

myself, I wouldn't be able to stand in front of the VAT authorities or other people and argue my case as well as I do. As far as my three children are concerned, one thing I have been adamant about is wanting to teach them how to think. I love it when I ask them things and they try to make connections with the things they know. It's adorable to see them using their minds and it makes me very happy.”

Would he be happy to see them supporting the idea of a benevolent dictator rather than a democratically elected government?

“I don't particularly believe in democracy either,” he says, and I momentarily wonder if he's purposely being provocative. “If you have a strong but fair leader in control of everything – and, unfortunately, most dictators are not fair – that may work better than elected leaders,

who fail at achieving a good work/life balance, he consciously prioritises his work, in part because he recognises that the family's well-being depends on the financial rewards that work brings.

“Work is the one thing you can rely on,” he says, “and the notion that money is evil is a great misconception. I think people should have the right to determine how they spend the money they have worked for. Money is not the problem, greed is.”

The VAT expert also has a problem with the idea that 50% of the Board of every company should be women. “It's fine in theory. I believe that there should be equal access to every post but what if they don't deserve to be there?” he asks. “We all know that, in Cyprus, people are being put in positions because of how they have served a political party, even if they lack the knowledge

Alexis Tsielepis feels that he knows what he wants and how to ensure that he can sustain his business and maintain his family. Everything else is secondary, he says. “I'm finally content with where I am. I've found a certain path, I'm happy with it, I understand what I'm doing, I know where I'm going and I think we're going to be doing some amazing things over the next 20, 30, 40 years.”

The last thing he can be accused of is pessimism. “There are lots of worrying things happening around us,” he says, “but what can we do? It's a bit like not flying because you're afraid the plane might crash. It's out of your hands. Just enjoy the flight!”

I don't know how many cigars I will have to smoke until I reach the end but for now I'm happy and proud of who I am.” **☐**