

Helping HANDS

Discover more about the power duo at Pastille salon who have combined hard work with a talented team of nail techs to give back to their community in a big, beautiful way...

KAT HILL REPORTS

Erene Hadjiioannou and Abra Wynn are two women on a mission. Flying the flag for local business partnerships as well as female business owners, their Leeds-based salon, Pastille, is fast becoming a hub for the local community, as well as a destination for a top-notch mani/pedi.

A combination of Abra's law background, Erene's psychotherapy training and the duo's determination to make a difference has seen the salon's success skyrocket, and they claim that their sense of community is largely to thank.

"People always want to feel part of something, and that's an empowering concept," explains Erene. "The network we've built over the last few years means that we can support local businesses and our clients in a bespoke way within the salon, and it's reaped amazing rewards. We wanted to truly be a part of the city, rather than just offering a service."

"Clients always ask us what's going on in the city and tell us about their lives," agrees Abra. "This assures the 'community' feeling in Pastille which allows them to feel truly comfortable and at ease."

Keeping the wellbeing of clients firmly as the focus of their business, the salon is going that one step further for both its customers and those in the local area. "Women are so savvy about their beauty services," observes Erene. "They have no interest in parting with their money if a product doesn't suit them or the customer service is terrible."

"As a salon, we believe that everyone should be who they are and then use beauty products and services to enjoy and enhance that. Our independent salon allows us to respond well to what clients want, including being interested in them personally, as well as catering to their nail needs."



Erene Hadjiioannou and Abra Wynn



HWith both Pastille and the customer benefitting from the ethos built into their services, the salon has earned a reputation as the neighbourhood beauty bar. "Because we specialise in gel polish manicures, most of our clients are regulars who return every two or three weeks," Abra reveals.

"We really do get to know them."

We know what colours they like or if we've seen any nail art they'd love and even how many sugars they take in their tea!"

This compassionate philosophy has made ripples in the local community. With Erene's work as a psychotherapist, she has taken active roles in schemes designed to collaborate with local black and minority ethnic groups, as well as with refugees and asylum seeker organisations. She offers the salon as a forum where some of these women can meet – both as businesswomen and friends. Pastille means that participants in the schemes have a central location in which to meet as well as access to resources – including Erene and Abra's knowledge and experience.

"The schemes are for women who either have skills they want to develop into a business, or women who have had businesses in their country of origin that they want to successfully replicate in the UK," explains Erene. "Part of my professional life in mental health involves working with black and minority ethnic persons including refugees and asylum seekers. For me, it was easy to see how they can be marginalised when they come to the UK, and this involves a lack of easily available opportunities."

"If someone is trying to build a life that includes a professional identity they find meaningful, being a refugee and asylum

"Pastille is a base to create a community of women who support each other and can connect through business and friendship."

seeker comes with more barriers to this than most people experience. For example, they might have limited English skills or find it hard to understand the statutory requirements of setting up a business and hiring people. Where could they even go to find a friendly person to ask? Add this to a lack of a community, and the ability to use the skills brought from their country of origin can seem impossible. I don't believe that opportunities should be limited to anyone, and this includes business opportunities.

"Pastille is a base to create a community of women who support each other and can connect through business and friendship. I hope this helps women professionally, and assists in their integration into Leeds because feeling outside of society is a barrier in itself to living a meaningful life," Erene continues. "We need this representation to fully appreciate the diverse skills women can bring to business."

Abra and Erene also believe this inclusiveness can transfer to the wider beauty sector. "I think it's important to actively re-define beauty to acknowledge how diverse women are," Erene observes. "The media often reports on cultural appropriation and stereotyping gender, so placing the value of self-representation in the hands of women so that they can create their own image rather than having the industry define it for them is so important. For me, it's an extension of what Pastille does already, in that we need to be led by our clients. Abra and I believe that the principle of actively listening to others can be applied to the beauty industry as a whole."

Another scheme Pastille has spearheaded has seen the salon team up with fellow local independent businesses. After receiving a positive response from the companies they approached during the setup of the salon, the collaborations took off, seeing a mutual benefit for all involved. "Working together with another company means we can maximise exposure of what we each offer," explains Abra. "We mostly support local, independent businesses like us in this way, although we have worked with bigger, national brands. Secondly, we can contribute to Leeds as a city by letting people know what's on through these collaborations."

"Everything that is offered via this scheme is free. We have never charged anyone for use of our space or services," adds Erene. "That's really important to us, as the spirit of the scheme is a skills exchange to promote businesses in the area. We negotiate what will suit both parties and put it into action and this can be anything, and makes Pastille much more than just a salon offering great beauty treatments."

"We always have our clients in mind, as we want them to benefit from any collaboration we have going on," Erene continues. "Most recently we supported a new interior design and homeware company through a social media competition. In return, they created a beautiful display for the salon that showcased their product."

"The biggest example is our work with a local breast cancer support service who we now raise funds for every year, following a month-long



event in collaboration with bar and restaurant, The Botanist, and a local fashion designer, Bo Carter."



A display in the salon, following a collaboration with a homeware company

The business model has proved successful with the approach winning local business awards. The salon won *Best New Business* from local indie magazine, *Leeds Love Affair*, in 2014. Winning with over 7000 votes, the salon has obviously proven popular. Last year also saw Abra and Erene jointly win *Young Entrepreneur of the Year* at a regional *Women in Business* awards ceremony, hosted by Forward Ladies.

"It was such a huge shock to win both awards!" enthuses Abra. "*Leeds Love Affair* was great because it was voted for by local people and our clients so it was very personal; it felt like we had cemented our place in the incredible Leeds independent business scene."

"I'd say the most surprising thing about winning the *Women in Business* award was just how impressive the competition was," Abra continues. "Some women there were from companies that turn over millions of pounds each year so it was a huge honour to even be shortlisted, let alone go on to win our regional final."

Crediting the support of their team of nail technicians and beauticians, those at Pastille have a mutual understanding of the brand and promote self-improvement. "We wouldn't be anywhere near as successful as we have been without our incredible nail techs," Erene enthuses. "I'm so proud of them and it makes me so happy to see them develop and enjoy their careers with us."

"Three out of five of our team have been with us since we opened," affirms Abra. "They have really bought into the brand and understand the image we are trying to present."

With their passion and enthusiasm, the partnership between Erene and Abra is the driving force behind the business. Celebrating what their business and collaborations promote between businesswomen, they know how to play to their own strengths to help the bigger picture.

"Our partnership is really important," concludes Erene. "It's a big part of driving Pastille forward from a business perspective and supporting each other to make decisions on all the things that we're responsible for. Between us, we have a shared vision for Pastille." 

Pastille is a finalist in the Scratch Stars Awards 2016. Check out the other finalists on page 60.

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