# Tristan Simon, Dallas

# How a U.K. expat shook up Texas nightlife.

By Barrett Brown

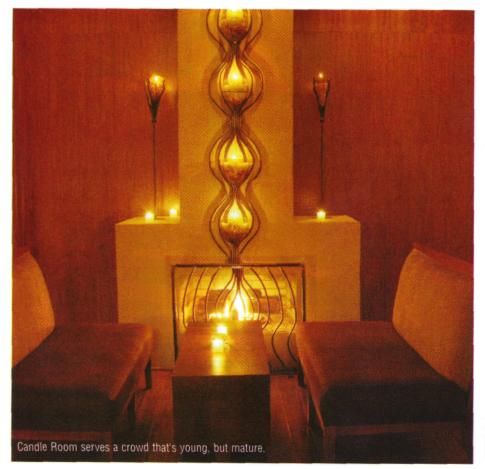
Sometimes even the most accomplished club scene needs a swift kick in the pants, if only to keep local operators on their toes. But after six years of Tristan Simon, many Dallas-area club owners may be having trouble sitting down.

Back in 1998, almost no one in Dallas had ever heard of the soft-spoken U.K. native. Today, he's one of the city's most oft-interviewed local celebrities. His company, Consilient Restaurants, now owns many of the area's most popular restaurants and nightclubs – and has plans to build more in the coming years.

But Simon isn't like other giant-slaying nightclub magnates, and the Dallas media tends to linger on his unusually placid demeanor as the key to his success. Simon himself rejects that idea, with a few qualifications: "I think the differences between me and my industry peers have been overblown in the media to create better narrative," he says. "The restaurant/bar business is inhabited by such a diverse array of personalities that it's impossible to determine a 'norm.' That said, I probably take a more cerebral approach to the business than most, but no one can be successful in any business over time without making well-reasoned, disciplined decisions."

If you hear Simon tell it, his breakthrough success came as a result of establishing a nearly insurmountable "quality gap" between his properties and those of his competitors. The kind of urban splendor for which Simon has become known is best represented in his two most critically-acclaimed properties: Sense, which opened in 2002, and Candle Room, which opened a year later.

"Sense and Candle Room ushered a series of 'firsts' into Dallas nightlife," he said.





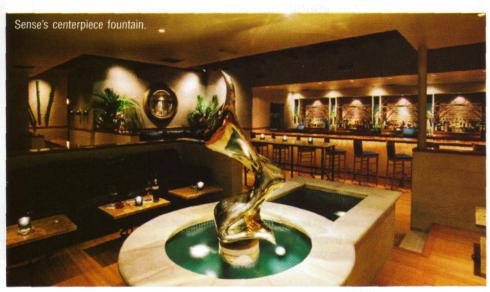
"They were the first truly private, referralbased nightclubs; they were the first venues to introduce and popularize bottle service; and – in my biased opinion – they remain the only nightclubs in Dallas to deliver upscale, restaurant-caliber service."

And the only ones to benefit from Simon's "cerebral approach."

### A Carpet Bagger's Leg-Up

Despite his obvious fitness for the nightlife industry. Simon wouldn't have seemed a likely candidate for the business to anyone who knew him in the past. Having spent much of his early childhood in Britain and much of the rest moving from town to town in the U.S. thanks to a number of odd career moves on the part of the parents, the intellectually gifted young man with a penchant for Emerson and Faulkner rarely felt comfortable in social settings - at least until he found his interpersonal niche while attending Duke University. There, he befriended All-Star basketball player Cherokee Parks, whom he soon convinced to forgo the usual routes of agency representation and





# Simon's Spots

The venues that make up his unlikely empire.

#### Cuba Libre

The founding of Cuba Libre helped to transform Henderson Avenue into the paradigm of Dallas cool that it is today. Outside, the bright yellow stucco does a fine job of announcing of promoting festivity; inside, drastically low lighting goes a long way in reminding patrons to keep the festivity to a cool minimum.

#### Sense

Positioned just a block from Cuba Libre, Sense boasts one of the most thoroughly futuristic interiors in Texas. Seven separate lounge areas and countless curtained alcoves manage to break down the club's 3,800 square feet into islands of intimacy while still retaining a general unity of design.

#### Candle Room

Like its sister Sense, Candle Room caters to the Dallas caste system with referral-based exclusivity. And though it brings in a younger crowd, the equally opulent nightspot manages to enforce a certain level of maturity through sheer stateliness of design: Dignity is imposed on patrons by the sort of mahogany grandeur that makes little allowance for undue silliness.

#### Genghis Grill

Lest he drown in his own pool of hip, Simon recently acquired the Genghis Grill chain, a Mongolian barbecue restaurant with a decidedly different clientele. Odds are good that CEO Simon has big plans for the increasingly popular "interactive dining" concept.

instead allow Simon to handle most of his affairs. Those familiar with the deal later described how Simon's sheer enthusiasm was enough to convince Parks to take him up on the idea. And so when Parks was signed to the Mavericks in 1995, Simon accompanied him down to Dallas.

Finding himself quite fond of his adopted city, an ambitious young Simon quickly set about looking for a way to conquer it. And seeing the city for the first time, he quickly Dallas' biggest
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determined that Dallas' biggest weakness was its residents' transparent desire for exclusivity.

Though only 23 at the time, Simon was able to convince an accomplished local restaurateur to finance a high-end restaurant/bar concept in a major Dallas suburb, with the agreement that Simon would be allowed to run it. But the unlikely duo found itself beaten to the punch: Another local restaurant owner had already started construction on a similar project nearby, a steakhouse called Cool River. Undaunted, Simon approached the potential competitor with the sort of infectious enthusiasm which was fast

Simon saw that the area immediately surrounding Henderson was fast becoming one of the most densely-populated areas in the city – and much of that population was young, hip, and professional.

becoming his hallmark. After a few days of negotiation, the three men were partners, and Simon was put in charge of managing Cool River. But within a year of the restaurant's opening, Simon was bought out by the other two under circumstances that are something of a mystery even today.

Now armed with several hundred thousand dollars, Simon set about looking for fertile ground for his own empire. He eventually decided on Henderson Avenue, which intersected Dallas' main artery, Central Expressway, and also had the advantage of being located between downtown, where much of his target demo worked, and North Dallas, where much of his target demo lived. Even better, the area immediately surrounding Henderson was fast becoming one of the most densely-populated areas in the city – and much of that population was young, hip, and professional. This became the home of Simon's first solo project, Cuba Libre.

## **Casting The Castes**

Cuba Libre was an unprecedented success almost immediately, stealing away the smart set from competing clubs and revitalizing the surrounding area almost overnight.

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But a clever location was just the tip of the iceberg: Simon had also come to understand what he now calls "the Dallas caste system," as well as the particular manner in which the various castes like to be catered to. And however much he may downplay it, the inherently analytical nature of Simon's success becomes downright obvious the longer you talk to him about his properties.

"Sense and Candle Room are distinguished by target market," he said. "Specifically, Sense attracts an older, more mature customer that otherwise prefers to



socialize in restaurants and residences rather than bars and nightclubs, while Candle Room caters to the traditional, younger set. Sense and Candle Room do share some customers – "tweeners" who enjoy both venues for complimentary reasons – but the net effect is synergistic, not competitive."

Everything about each venue, including the music programming, precisely serves its target market. "Music is an essential ingredient in all of our projects, and our music director, Pat Tetrick, tailors music content to fit the particular requirements of each concept that we operate," says Simon. "Music is most important to Candle Room, which derives much of its reputation from the quality and freshness of its DJ-based music program."

And Simon's attention to detail gets focused on even the most technical aspects of hospitality, including lighting design. "Good, seductive, flattering lighting has always been a signature of our projects," he says. "It's plausible to say that no other single visual element contributes as much as lighting to the overall feel of a space."