

Business Model

MARK HEDLEY TALKS AMBITION AND OPENING RESTAURANTS
WITH MAURITIUS-BORN MODEL ALICIA ROUNTREE, WHO
KNOWS BUSINESS AND BEAUTY IN EQUAL MEASURE

PHOTOGRAPHY
PAUL FARNHAM

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
LAOURA STARLING

PRODUCTION
LAVINO PRODUCTIONS

GET THE LOOK:
Donna Karan New
York chunky-knit
cashmere sweater,
£1,985 from
net-a-porter.com





GET THE LOOK:
Frame Denim Cable-knit
wool-blend sweater,
£420; REDValentino
twill shorts, £180; Ballet
Beautiful lily knitted
jersey legwarmers, £75
All available from
net-a-porter.com

MAKE-UP
Justine Jenkins using
bareMinerals & Murad

HAIR STYLING
Elliot Bssila
at Terri Manduca

**PRODUCTION
ASSISTANTS**
Olga Kott, Elizabeth
Butkevich, Abi Robinson

**PHOTOGRAPHY
ASSISTANT**
Chiara Dalla Rosa

PRODUCTION
lavinoproductions.com

THERE ARE TWO fund managers on the next table. They have important-looking papers spread out across the table strategically positioned around their côte de bœuf. But they could not be less interested in the food or their work. Instead, they are engaging in the least subtle attempt at eavesdropping I have ever witnessed. Even if my lunch companion and I were from a rival fund, discussing strategy that put their portfolios at direct risk, they still wouldn't be leaning over quite so intently.

The reason for this interest is not food envy, nor is it – I'm sad to say – my aptitude for telling amusing anecdotes, but because of the woman I'm sitting opposite: international supermodel Alicia Rountree.

Although, the reason we decided to put Alicia on this month's **square mile** front cover is less about her career as a model, and more about what she is doing beyond this: she's already a successful restaurateur, knowledgeable nutritionist and a budding hotelier – but more on that later.

We're in St James's, in a restaurant that began life as a banking hall. This world of briefcases and business lunches is more used to superannuations than supermodels. At 5ft 9in plus heels, Alicia is tall, but not crazy tall. Yet the 29-year-old's beauty is difficult to ignore. In a cold dining room of corporate accounts and charcoal suits, she's like a warm island breeze.

Indeed, Alicia's background might have something to do with that. "I grew up in Mauritius. It was so special," she explains. "I lived in bare feet the whole time. I'd go swimming or waterskiing before school. I had a pet lemur; we had ostriches."

Her transition from bare feet to Blahniks was a story of a perfect storm: right person, right place, right time. At 17, she had left boarding school in Lugano, Switzerland, and come to London. The interior designer and socialite Nicky Haslam is a family friend – and invited her as his guest to *Vogue* magazine's It's Fashion! party. It was here that she was scouted by an agent from IMG Models. She was soon shooting campaigns in London, Paris and New York, landing contracts with Ralph Lauren and Abercrombie & Fitch.

A cover shoot for Italian *Elle* helped her go truly global – in more ways than one. "They actually came to Mauritius to do a shoot on me there. They met my family and said, 'Let's put everyone in the shoot,' so I ended up having my nieces and nephews in the pictures and everything – it was a huge story."

When it comes to her favourite client, Victoria's Secret is near the top of the pile: "The shoots with them are so much fun because you're basically just on a beach having

a laugh with your friends. It's like you're out on holiday with your family." If your family happens to include an above-average number of swimwear models, presumably.

I push her to reveal some behind-the-scenes gossip – surely with so many egos there are cat fights? "There's honestly no bitchiness," she protests. "People are like, 'Oh, models must be so bitchy,' but that's just not the case."

The role of the supermodel has changed over recent years. With the likes of Cara Delevingne and Rosie Huntington-Whiteley breaking Hollywood, acting has to be on Alicia's priority list, too. She is studying the craft at Stella Adler in New York and RADA in London. "The more I take on, the better I manage," she says of her admirable work ethic. "If I have one thing to do in the day, I would not do it. But if I have ten things to do, I do them all really well."

From a young age, Alicia was an accomplished athlete and sprinter (would you

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expect anything less?). "At boarding school, I could run faster than all the boys – they would get so mad." But dancing was her first passion – her career path may have been very different had she pursued it – and she has managed to work it into her life, recently launching her first fitness app. Aptly named Supermodel Ballet Body, it sees her team up with celebrity trainer and former ballet dancer Robert Brace to create a total body workout designed to help you build a long, lean, sculpted body. Well, that's the theory anyway.

"The idea came up because I travel so much and I wanted to create a fitness programme that people can easily do on the go – in a hotel room or in your home."

But as a lazy man who enjoys beer more than ballet, could I realistically attempt it? "Yes – absolutely," she urges. "All the workouts are very much targeted at different areas of your body – so you can do 10 minutes of one thing, 10 minutes of another. It's all really

simple movements, so it is accessible, but at the end you will feel the burn."

Bringing it back to fashion, she admits that she would like to design "a ballet-inspired line of fitness clothing". No prizes for guessing who would model that.

Keeping a body like Alicia's, you might expect her to live off a diet of wheatgrass and dust, but she tucks into a hefty portion of rich risotto and joins me for a couple of glasses of lunchtime sancerre.

"Food is so important," she explains. "A few years ago, I became really interested in everything surrounding what you put into your body, how your body reacts and how people are different." She's just completed a year-long course at Integrative Nutrition – an online school for nutritionists. "At first I did it just for knowledge, then I started helping friends, and now I've learned so much I'm hoping to write a book one day."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Listening to Alicia talk through some of her favourite dishes from her native Mauritius is a salivatory experience, especially when you've been waiting 30 minutes for your main course.

It's this obsession with food that led to her launching her own restaurant – and later chain – with her then boyfriend Nicolas Dutko. The first Tartinery opened in New York's trendy Nolita in 2010. The restaurant specialises in tartines – open-faced sandwiches that are very popular in Paris. Although presented as relatively primitive fare in France, the tartines are taken to the next level by Tartinery in true Big Apple style. The first restaurant was so successful that two years after its launch the Plaza Hotel invited them to open a second in its iconic Food Hall. This is the equivalent of Michael Ward asking your local sarnie shop to open a concession in the Harrods food hall. It was a real coup – and helped give them the confidence to open a third instalment in New York's financial district, around the corner from the likes of BNY Mellon and Deloitte, and a stone's throw from One World Trade Center.

So what next for the burgeoning empire? "Well, the plan is to open two or three more in New York first," she explains, "then move over to the west coast – and London, of course."

Although her restaurants aren't vegetarian, I'm surprised to learn that Alicia is, especially given how much incredible fresh seafood is available in Mauritius: "I know, it is weird with me coming from an island. Maybe it's because they're my friends – I swim with them all the time, so I don't want to eat them." It's difficult to argue with that, and I begin to feel slightly guilty for ordering the sea bass. ►

► Alicia's ambitions in the hospitality industry aren't limited to food and drink: next on her radar is a hotel. When we meet, she has just returned from her home country, where she'd been discussing hotel designs with an American architect: "He's an 'eco-green' – everything he designs is very responsible and restorative towards the environment." Her parents run a sugar plantation on the island, which includes a stretch of rugged coastline that would be perfect for the job. "This will not be your standard beach holiday resort, but rather a healthy retreat – with nature walks, yoga and meditation." Leonardo DiCaprio introduced her to the architect at a fundraising ball. (The actor is a well-known environmental activist, and recently bought Blackadore Caye – 104 acres of wild, unpopulated land off the coast of Belize – to turn into an eco resort.)

As conversation returns to Mauritius, it's clear that although she lives the life of an international model and businesswoman, home is where her heart is. "I always want to live at least part of the year there because I had such an amazing childhood. I would want the same for my kids eventually. Every time I'm home I'm like, 'It's so amazing. I need to figure out how to spend more time here.'"

One way to achieve this could be by working on her first fashion collection there. Textile is big business on the island. "Hopefully one day I will have my own line – or at least a collaboration – and we could produce it there."

Alicia is not lacking in drive: "It's kind of annoying because I'm never quite happy. It is hard being like that – you want to keep doing better; there's always more." Then there's the modelling – she has gigs in New York, LA and Germany in the next couple of weeks. Then it's back to London for the **square mile** cover shoot, before, well, who knows where? One thing is for sure: this girl is going places. ■

GIRL ABOUT TOWN

FAVOURITE LONDON BAR

"Chiltern Firehouse: the restaurant is crazy, but the bar is really quiet – you can always get a seat. It's like a sitting room."

FAVOURITE NEW YORK BAR

"Soho House: there's the outdoor area with the little pool and the loungers."

WORST CHAT-UP MOVE IN A BAR

"Er... probably slapping my ass."



MODEL VENTURE:
(clockwise) A swimwear campaign for Victoria's Secret; Alicia's flagship Tartinery restaurant in New York's Nolita district; the jetsetting model is used to striking a pose in several countries in one month.

