**Earl of East – 1500 words 4.5 hours**

**Neither Paul nor Niko had the burning desire to become candlemakers. Their backgrounds in media combined with a robust work ethic fuelled the desire to express themselves through a creative outlet apart from their full-time jobs. Inspired by both the craft-making and prevalence of influencers they witnessed in America along with a quintessentially Japanese style, they created the scented candle-turned-lifestyle brand Earl of East. Meanwhile, their French Bulldog Piper ensures the workaholics maintain balance in their busy entrepreneurial schedules. Paul and Niko’s desire to continuously refine and add layers to their business has culminated in the international retail success it is now.**

Paul and Niko’s Earl of East journey was entirely organic. Delving into candle-making research amidst a perfumery class, their method was simply to begin learning by doing. Niko illuminates, “It was a reinvestment of our skills. We brought essential oils in and began experimenting, becoming obsessed with the candle-making process which is not dissimilar to cooking and something we both fully enjoyed.” Paul and Niko collaborated with a fellow creative who made her own ceramic vessels to develop the first drop of products. Commencing with a simple East London market stall feeding into wholesale then burgeoned into requests from independent stores and finally Selfridges meaning they had to upsize. They took on a studio in close proximity to the market stalls and began hosting workshops to teach people how to make scented soy wax candles. This allowed people to work through the entire process from equipment, materials, technicalities and the final production.

After six months of growth, the men took on board a larger space in Hackney, proving to be quite the hideaway. While not conducive for a shop environment, the concealed nature of the site only added to its following with an underground essence. With the support of local press, the new premises transcended into a community hub which allowed entrepreneurs to commingle, like a mini–Silicon Valley of East London. Then as fate would have it, King’s Cross developers Argent heard of Earl of East’s success and approached Paul and Niko to open up shop in the fashionably desirable Coal Drops Yard. Paul summarises their journey: “Before we knew it, we had gone from being market traders to manufacturers to retailers on a larger scale. Opening next door to COS at Coal Drops Yard was probably a bold move however we thought ‘We’ve been given this chance so we may as well try it.” The move was favourable and they’ve since reaped the benefits of a rapidly growing client base while also boosting their line to include bath and body products.

During the early days of Earl of East’s business building, Paul and Nico welcomed a particular diversion. They took care of a playful yet well-behaved French Bulldog named Oscar for an associate traveling overseas. What was initially meant to be three weeks incrementally drew out to three years. Oscar became their market stall accomplice and a studio fixture, accompanying the men wherever they went. Soon, Paul and Nico couldn’t see life without a dog adding to their colourful life. Oscar improved not only the work-life balance in their demanding schedules but also the type of structure helpful to busy entrepreneurs. Niko explicates, “I realised how nice it was owning a Oscar, going out for morning and evening walks. It enriched our lives over those three and a half years.” A tumultuous ordeal ensued when they suddenly had to return Oscar back to his owner after such an extended period of time and they soon found themselves heavy hearted over their loss. Paul and Niko explain how their house felt empty - the lack of the dog smell even triggering the sense of Oscar’s absence. Two weeks later, grief evolved into joy when they decided to welcome a bustling Frenchie puppy into their lives who they named Piper.

Though French Bulldogs had never been on either of the men’s radars, once experiencing the joy Oscar brought to them, they both felt they could never consider any other breed. They breathed a sigh of relief to have the merriment which a dog – particularly one with the sweet character of a French Bulldog – brings into their hectic lives. In their search for a pup, Paul and Niko researched and made the effort to ask questions to people they knew locally who owned Frenchies. The men were both aware of the cruel practices present in the breeding industry, including unscrupulous puppy farms and bootlegging breeders, making locating an ethical breeder a non-negotiable. Paul and Niko explain the sudden change in routine resulting from taking on a brand-new puppy. “He toilet trained quite quickly though he’s very stubborn…He had so much energy; he would walk, come home then play some more. We were at home more than we had ever been before.” Paul and Niko’s new addition proved to be a dose of needed grounding amongst the couple’s flurry of occupational focus.

Though owning a dog is an incredibly responsibility, there are a number of benefits to owning a dog as an entrepreneur. An individual with an entrepreneurial streak often carries certain characteristics. These include fortitude, focus, strong work ethic, vision, versatility and decisiveness. One could easily see how these traits lead to success, however also cause an imbalance in the energy allocated for a personal life and down-time. Owning an animal, particularly a dog, enforces a person to take breaks which allows them to regroup after intensive mental and business activity. Niko highlights, “It’s nice as sometimes you have that endless to-do list and he forces you to have a break by coming up to you as if to say ‘I need lunch!’ or ‘Okay, I need to go out now’ or when you want to work late, you just can’t as the dog needs your attention. It reminds you to live life rather than to always work non-stop.”

Along with Piper adding to the couple’s peace of mind, he is also a comforting fixture for staff at the Coal Drops Yard store. His snoring has become background music at Earl of East which rather than an annoyance has become strangely relaxing. Snoring, though deemed charming, is often a chronic problem for French Bulldogs. Through the years they have been cosmetically bred to have shortened heads and compressed jaws, both a detriment to their airways, throats and even noses. Frenchies, considered brachycephalic dogs, often have trouble breathing properly and therefore cannot take in enough oxygen which is the reason they often mouth-breathe. For Frenchies such as Piper, excess skin can also prove to be a burden. Additionally, they often suffer from an elongated soft palate meaning there remains a mismatch in the dog’s mouth anatomy which further exacerbates breathing troubles. Niko and Paul are presently looking into scheduling the surgery for Piper to correct this issue so he can be his happiest and healthiest self, though his soothing snoring will be missed in the shop.

Paul and Niko have found such mammoth success in what was originally a small concept. Through their seven years in business, their main focus is still on achievement through remaining dynamic. Paul remarks, “Our goalpost moves all the time. Some of our customers experience us as a homewares store, others find us through our workshops and consider Earl of East a craft brand while others know us as a product.” When asked about the possibility of other start-ups mimicking Earl of East’s business products, Paul replies thoughtfully. “What people cannot replicate is our journey and our story. People could emulate the sense of the product but there are so many parts to what we do. I know how rewarding it is, but also know much how hard work it is. I know it was very easy to start but it’s not as easy to keep it evolving and growing over the years.” For the business duo, Covid was not a deterrent. Whether through social media, emails or ensuring regular deliveries, they committed to remaining loyal and reliable for their customers while many independent shops cut down on deliveries and services.

As for the future, Paul and Niko are currently opening another shop on Red Church Street in Shoreditch. They also have their sights set on warehouse building where all functions will merge to make it a proper hub, bringing the team together in a more symbiotic way. Their long-term vision is to build an international community through opening stores in the US and Europe especially after their successful pop-up venture at the Shinjuku Department Store in Isitan, Japan. No matter where in the world they choose to be, Piper’s stubborn, jovial character will continue to be their constructive diversion. Paul and Niko summarise, “I think living your life and having a dog is not about a balance, it’s about integration. The best thing about being a dog owner for anyone is it allows you to learn how to take a moment for you and the dog.”