



Makeover time

From their base in a comparatively clean and green Discovery Bay, Emmanuel and Severine Faipoux are determinedly promoting a holistic form of hairdressing. *Lauren Gordon* checks in for an appointment

A conversation with DB residents Emmanuel and Severine Faipoux is like having coffee with good friends — even if you have only known them a few minutes.

Friendly and engaging, the couple from France is in the midst of developing a new concept in hairdressing — a salon where virtually all the products are natural, organic and, they say, far better for your hair, and the environment than man-made chemicals.

With a gruelling schedule — they are busy with their clients and ambitious developments for their business Emmanuel F — they talk with a freshness, enthusiasm and optimism for their work which suggests a real passion for what they do. But their journey to this point has at times been far from smooth.

Emmanuel stumbled upon the profession of hair styling while doing compulsory military service at the age of 18. “I was in a French army camp in Germany, we were doing commando training, and the hairdresser at the camp was about to leave,” he recalls. “They needed someone to take over from him and I thought ‘why not?’ The very first time I cut hair, I knew immediately that it was what I wanted to do.”

On leaving the army, Emmanuel got a job in a salon in La Vendee, where he met the then 16-year-old Severine. “When I first met Emmanuel I thought he was very arrogant, thinking he was superior, from Paris,” she says with a laugh. “But I changed my mind very quickly.”

Two years later they were married, and Emmanuel was offered the opportunity to work for the major French franchise Jacques Dessange. This soon led to the couple opening a new Jacques Dessange salon in Biarritz, on France’s south-west coast.

It was the first time they had worked together. And by now they also had their first child, Romain, now 18.

“We managed the salon for three years,” says Emmanuelle. “It was very successful, but we started thinking ‘do we really want to stay in France?’ We knew we wanted to open our own salon, together, and France is very ‘full’. We started to think why not go overseas.”

Severine recalls that they were on holiday when they started to discuss this seriously. “I had a dream of going to Australia. But we did not speak any English then. Emmanuel thought of Montreal, being French speaking. We cut our holiday short and he flew there, just like that, to have a look.”

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But by then Jacques Dessange had heard that the pair wanted to move overseas. “He didn’t want to lose a good young stylist and manager, so he proposed Moscow and Beirut. We were not interested,” says Emmanuelle, “but then he offered Taiwan.”

The Taiwan project was an enticing challenge for the couple — opening the Jacques Dessange headquarters, quickly followed by another salon, setting up a training academy and developing the brand and business from scratch.

“We landed in Taipei in 1994, with two suitcases, one child, no English and no Chinese,” Severine says with a smile. “Taiwan was like going to another planet for us. We were in a totally Chinese environment, immersed in the culture.”

The business grew successfully and there were plans to open more salons in Taiwan. But, in 1995, Emmanuel was diagnosed with cancer, and everything changed.

“I was 30 years old. We had to return to France. I had chemotherapy and surgery and was out for 10 months. We lost our jobs, we lost everything,” Emmanuel says. “Before then I had been impatient. This really made me ask myself what is important in life, and realise that a life balance is so important.”

Once recovered, Emmanuel refused requests to return to Taiwan, fearing the impact the job could have on his health. The couple turned their attention to the US — and started learning English.

Emmanuel flew to Chicago, with a brief to work with a Jacques Dessange franchisee. But he did not have “a good feeling” about the man, and with a new focus on life after his illness, he turned down Chicago, and moved the family to Nashville instead.

“It was a wonderful time,” Severine says. “Just what we all needed. We worked together in a Jacques Dessange salon in a spa. We had a nice home, Romain started at an American school, and we began making some good friends.”



▶ But life threw another curve ball at the family, when one day in 1997 they received an unexpected call from Jacques Dessange US headquarters in New York, warning that their work visas might be invalid.

Emmanuel and Severine sought legal advice and discovered that their visas were good for New York but not for Nashville. Emmanuel explains, "It was big news in the US at the time. It seemed someone had cut corners to help French stylists come in to the US to work more quickly.

"The lawyer gave us two options: if we worked, we would do so illegally, or we could stay legally but we couldn't work. Of course we needed to work. We had used our savings in France while I was sick. We had a son to support."

The family left the US within the week, having been welcomed back by the Taiwanese businessman they had worked with in Taipei. "We didn't want to go back to France; we liked Asia," Emmanuelle says. "You have to adapt. And we wanted to adapt quickly — we had a son to look after, we needed to move."

But six months in, it became apparent that the owner basically wanted the business to run at a loss, as a tax break. The couple decided to waste no time "fighting against this wall". And, having visited and enjoyed Hong Kong, decided to move here.

Once Emmanuel was working — first with Jacques Dessange then leading local salons Head to Toe and

The Firm — the family joined him and Severine began at O2 salon.

"After all we had been through, I said, 'Hong Kong will work,'" Severine says. "It had to."

In Hong Kong, they had their second child, Mathilde, now 6, who goes to the French International School. Then, in December 2003, they opened their own salon in Central. "It was unbelievable," Emmanuel says. "We had so many ideas about what we wanted to do, about atmosphere in the salon, quality, standards. And now we could do it."

A goal that had been in the background for them for a long time came to the fore. "Since my cancer, we have been more interested in a holistic life; we eat organic food, and I felt that using chemical colours in the salon was not in harmony with our lifestyle, with the balance we try to create," Emmanuel says. "We love our jobs, but have wanted to be in a chemical-free, more natural environment."

This, he adds, is why they chose to live in Discovery Bay, for a greener, cleaner, family-friendly environment.

"We have been searching and searching for better, more natural products for our business. And when ▶▶



▶ I want something, I don't stop looking. I believe if something doesn't come at first, don't give up; it will come to you at the right time. Positive thinking — go for it and believe in it."

Emmanuel and Severine discovered what they were looking for when they found a UK company, Organic Colour System, which makes professional hair-care products from natural, organic ingredients.

A year ago, they made the jump to using these products exclusively. "It's been wonderful," Emmanuel says. "Our clients have seen the benefits: the products don't dry or damage hair. The colours last longer and they look so much better."

"As a stylist it is much more creative than using chemical products," Severine adds. "You do your own mixing and each client has their own individual colour. And we don't use aluminium foils any more for highlights. It's like bringing your hair back to life. Every day we are amazed."

The walls in Emmanuel F are painted in soothing, earth

tones, and gentle music plays in the background. There is an individual television in each client's chair and the aim is to make the atmosphere very relaxing. While the air is of course chemical-free, air filters will soon be installed and organic cotton towels are being sourced.

And is such a salon, cost prohibitive for customers? "We are cost-competitive," Emmanuel says. "The owners [of the organic hair products] don't advertise, all the investment goes into the products."

Emmanuel and Severine currently have a number of growth projects in the pipeline. "We are opening a Hair Academy in Hong Kong, and are now looking for investors. And we have been working on the image and concept for Emmanuel F — 'the natural evolution of hair and beauty'. This is a 'franchisable' concept. We want to develop worldwide."

"We really believe in this. It's part of who we are," Emanuel adds. "We are bringing health to people — our clients and our staff — and the environment. It's so great and makes us proud." **IDB**