From Restaurant Entrepreneur to Impact Investor: A Personal Account

By Dirk Roethig | CEO, VERDANTIS Impact Capital | March 3, 2026

Ten years ago, I would not have imagined that my path would lead me to Zurich and into the world of sustainable capital investment. I ran restaurants. I thought in menus, contribution margins, and shifts. Today I think in carbon sequestration, ESG compliance, and growth rates of Paulownia plantations. What appears at first glance to be two entirely different lives is, on closer inspection, a single continuous thread: the conviction that economic success and societal impact are not opposites.

Tags: Impact Investing, Personal Account, Sustainable Forestry, Paulownia, VERDANTIS, ESG, Entrepreneurship, Transformation, Restaurant Entrepreneur

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The Beginning: Restaurant Entrepreneur in Germany

For a long time, I was a restaurateur. Not a small one. Two restaurants, different in character, both ambitious.

Zen was my first major project — an establishment I built with genuine passion. Japanese cuisine, atmosphere, aspiration. Then came **NIKKO**: systematic gastronomy with Japanese character, home-style cooking, scalability as a concept. That sounds like entrepreneurial routine. In reality it was constant intensity: personnel management, procurement, quality control, customer satisfaction, regulatory compliance. Every day, seven days a week.

What fascinated me about the restaurant business was not the food itself — though the Japanese culinary principle, the craftsmanship, the precision, made a deep impression on me. What fascinated me was the web of relationships: between producers and consumers, between quality and price, between concept and execution. Restaurants are, in a sense, economic ecosystems in miniaturised form.

Crisis as Teacher

Gastronomy businesses have an unforgiving characteristic: they do not forgive structural errors over extended periods. NIKKO was struggling with a considerable carried-forward loss. The restaurant industry in general, and Japanese systematic gastronomy in particular, is a segment where margins are thin and mistakes costly.

I was confronted with a question every entrepreneur must ask at some point: does it make sense to pump more energy into a model under structural pressure — or is it time for a different path?

This question was not easy. I had invested not only capital in these operations, but years of my life. Employees, concepts, relationships. The decision to let go requires a clarity about oneself that cannot be forced — it must ripen.

What carried me through this process was a simple conviction: failure is not defeat if you have learned something you can apply elsewhere.

The Discovery of Impact Investing

The question that occupied me after the end of my active restaurant phase was not "what do I do now?" — but "what would I have done differently earlier?"

In retrospect, the problem with the restaurant business was not quality or concept. The problem was the scalability of sustainable business models. Good restaurants are often dependent on specific people, individual suppliers, location-bound factors. They scale poorly. Their societal contribution — as employers, as cultural establishments, as parts of a neighbourhood — is real, but localised.

Impact investing, I initially thought, was something for philanthropists and development banks. Then I started to read. Seriously.

The European impact investing market, it turned out, is growing dynamically: from an estimated USD 1.08 trillion in 2025 to a projected USD 2.1 trillion by 2033 (Market Data Forecast, 2025). This is not a niche trend. This is a realignment of institutional capital allocation. European private equity funds with ESG classification under SFDR Article 8 now account for 40 percent of all new funds (Invest Europe, 2025).

And suddenly I saw something I recognised from gastronomy: the moment when a trend becomes a movement.

Why Forestry Specifically?

My path to sustainable forestry as a core investment was not linear. It began with a simple question I asked myself: where is there real impact — measurable, lasting, scalable — and simultaneously a structural undersupply of capital?

The answer lay in the data. Nature-Based Solutions could deliver more than a third of the CO■ reductions needed by 2030 — yet receive less than three percent of global climate finance (WRI, 2023). That is not a small gap. That is structural market failure waiting for correction.

Added to this is the regulatory dynamic. CSRD obligates European companies to transparent sustainability reporting (EcoActive ESG, 2026). TNFD makes nature loss a balance-sheet-relevant risk — 620 organisations with over USD 20 trillion under management have already voluntarily adopted the framework (TNFD, 2025). The voluntary carbon market is reforming: demand for high-quality NBS credits could exceed supply as early as 2025 (BCG, 2025).

This is not an environmental project. This is a capital market phenomenon.

Paulownia: The Wood That Changes Everything

When I first heard about Paulownia as a commercial forestry object, my initial reaction was scepticism. Trees that absorb ten times more CO■ than ordinary species? Timber ready for harvest in under a decade? That sounds like a sales pitch.

So I read. Primary sources.

In *Frontiers in Environmental Science* I found the data that dispelled my suspicions: Paulownia plantations can sequester more than 60 tonnes of CO_2 per hectare per year in a well-managed system — over an 80-year lifecycle (Frontiers, 2024). A British plantation with Paulownia stock is reported to capture 150,000 tonnes of CO_2 in the first ten years (Carbon Herald, 2023).

I also studied the critical aspects. *Paulownia tomentosa* — the wild form — appears on invasive species lists in twelve US states (Worldtree.eco, 2023). That is a real problem. It is also a solvable problem: commercial forestry uses exclusively sterilised hybrid varieties, whose germination rate is zero (iPaulownia, 2025). No seed propagation. No uncontrolled spread. Biologically safe.

What particularly impressed me is the coppicing principle: Paulownia regenerates from the root stock after harvesting. Multiple harvest cycles without replanting. That sounds like a detail — in forestry economics it is a paradigm shift.

The Comparison That Explains Everything

Allow me to draw an unusual comparison. A restaurant and a Paulownia plantation have more in common than one might think.

Both require upfront investment before the first returns flow. Both depend on input quality — in the restaurant ingredients, in the forest soil and microclimate. Both gain stability through scaling. And both fail when the fundamental concept is wrong — regardless of tactical corrections.

The fundamental difference: a Paulownia forest emerges from its critical phase after approximately seven to ten years and thereafter becomes a self-renewing capital investment. A restaurant never does.

That was the moment I understood: forestry is not a sector for patient idealists. It is a sector for disciplined investors who recognise structural undervaluation.

Building VERDANTIS Impact Capital

VERDANTIS Impact Capital is the result of this insight. Based in Zurich — one of the world's most significant financial centres — we focus on the structuring and support of investments in sustainable forestry, particularly Paulownia-based projects that simultaneously deliver measurable climate impact and attractive returns.

This is not a philanthropic approach. We work with institutional investors, family offices, and asset managers who regard ESG compliance as an obligation and impact as an opportunity.

What I brought from gastronomy: systems must function before they scale. Quality assurance is not an afterthought. And the human component — trust, communication, integrity — is non-negotiable in any industry.

What Zurich as a location offers is an ecosystem: regulatory expertise, institutional capital, international networks. In the impact finance world, this is not a luxury but a prerequisite.

What I Do Differently Today — and What Has Stayed the Same

Looking back on my time as a restaurant entrepreneur today, I see no wasted time. I see a school.

The ability to bear P&L responsibility, lead employees, make decisions under pressure — these are not industry-specific skills. They are fundamental entrepreneurial competencies. They apply in the restaurant business just as in the capital market.

What has changed is the time horizon. A restaurant entrepreneur thinks in weeks and months. An impact investor thinks in years and decades. This extension of the planning horizon is not a constraint — it is a liberation. Because long-term perspective permits decisions that short-term pressure precludes.

What has remained constant: the conviction that the best investments are those that create genuine value. Not map it. Not redistribute it. Create it.

What This Path Can Say to Others

I tell this story not to generate admiration. I tell it because I know that many entrepreneurs stand at a moment when they want to direct their energy toward something larger than the next quarterly result.

The impact investing market in Europe is real and growing. Regulation is driving institutional capital toward ESG-compliant projects. Nature-Based Solutions do not receive the share of capital that their climate impact justifies — which creates an opportunity for informed investors.

And the personal transformation? That may be the most important part. It does not begin with a new sector. It begins with the willingness to translate what you have learned into a new context.

I was a restaurateur. Today I am an impact investor. The path between taught me that systems are always more important than individual steps — and that the most courageous entrepreneurial decision is sometimes the one that allows a fresh start.

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