CASE STUDY · INVESTIGATE · PRODUCT: LENS

February was the best month Ember & Oud ever had.

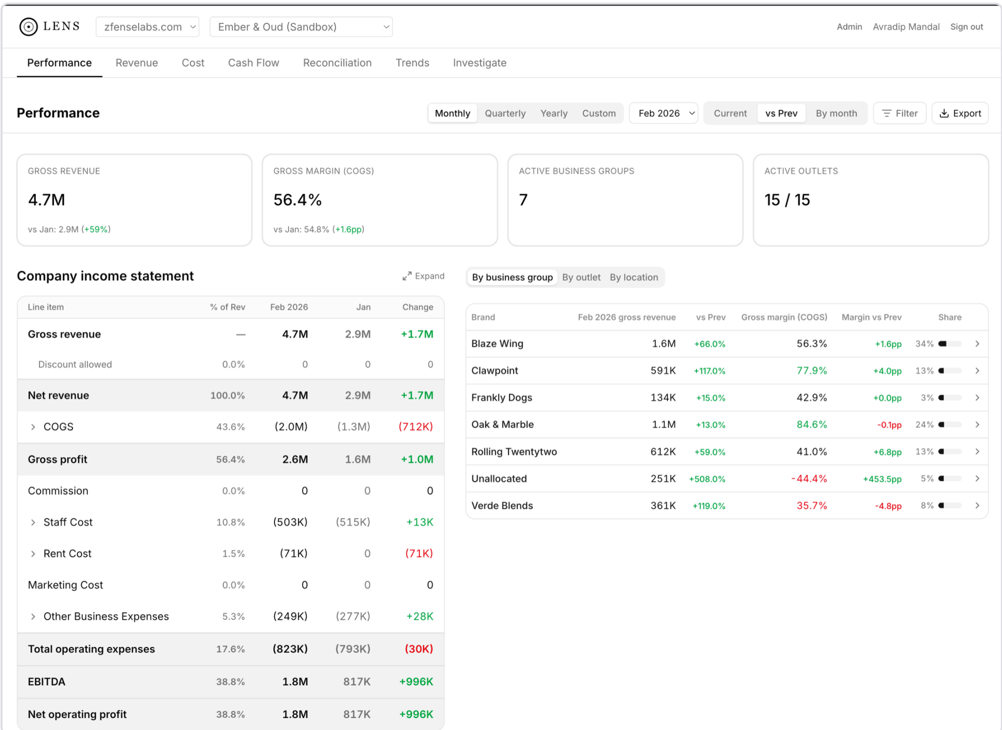
Then the finance lead asked to see every restaurant ranked by margin.

Ember & Oud is not a real company. It is the sandbox we use to demonstrate Lens: an invented Dubai restaurant group with a realistic ledger, so we can show a real investigation without showing you somebody else's books. Six brands out of a single commissary kitchen. Oak & Marble is the premium grill, earning 84 fils on every dirham it takes; Blaze Wing is the volume business; Clawpoint, Rolling Twentytwo, Frankly Dogs and Verde Blends fill out the portfolio. Fourteen restaurants, one finance team, all on Business Central.

The company is invented; the mess is the kind every real business knows. DEWA bills and mall service charges, four restaurants opened in a single month, a bucket of costs nobody has assigned to a branch yet. On the third of March, with February finally closed, **Amira, the group's finance lead**, opened Lens expecting a routine read.

FEBRUARY, AS REPORTED

Performance · Feb 2026 vs January



Line item	% of Rev	Feb 2026	Jan	Change
Gross revenue	—	4.7M	2.9M	+1.7M
Discount allowed	0.0%	0	0	0
Net revenue	100.0%	4.7M	2.9M	+1.7M
COGS	43.6%	(2.0M)	(1.3M)	(712K)
Gross profit	56.4%	2.6M	1.6M	+1.0M
Commission	0.0%	0	0	0
Staff Cost	10.8%	(503K)	(515K)	+13K
Rent Cost	1.5%	(71K)	0	(71K)
Marketing Cost	0.0%	0	0	0
Other Business Expenses	5.3%	(249K)	(277K)	+28K
Total operating expenses	17.6%	(823K)	(793K)	(30K)
EBITDA	38.8%	1.8M	817K	+996K
Net operating profit	38.8%	1.8M	817K	+996K

Brand	Feb 2026 gross revenue	vs Prev	Gross margin (COGS)	Margin vs Prev	Share
Blaze Wing	1.6M	+66.0%	56.3%	+1.6pp	34%
Clawpoint	591K	+117.0%	77.9%	+4.0pp	13%
Frankly Dogs	134K	+15.0%	42.9%	+0.0pp	3%
Oak & Marble	1.1M	+13.0%	84.6%	-0.1pp	24%
Rolling Twentytwo	612K	+59.0%	41.0%	+6.8pp	13%
Unallocated	251K	+508.0%	-44.4%	+453.5pp	5%
Verde Blends	361K	+119.0%	35.7%	-4.8pp	8%

The Performance tab, live from Business Central: KPIs, the full income statement, and every brand's month on one screen. Everything a dashboard should say about February, it says.

It was anything but routine. Revenue had jumped 59 percent to 4.7 million dirhams, margin was up a point and a half, EBITDA was nearly a million dirhams better than January, and every brand's revenue had grown by double digits. The screen was a wall of green, and every number on it was true. Most months, Amira would have poured the coffee and moved on.

Two rows stopped her. Verde Blends was the only brand in red, but it had just opened its second restaurant, and new sites bleed margin for a while, so that alone wasn't alarming. What bothered her was the row above it. **Unallocated** isn't a brand; it is cost that hasn't been assigned to any restaurant yet, sitting against a stub of revenue.

That row showed the largest green number on the screen: **+453.5 points**. An accounting residue doesn't improve by 453 points; it just gets less wrong. If a residue can swing that hard, how much of the green came from restaurants cooking better?

Brand	Feb 2026 gross revenue	vs Prev	Gross margin (COGS)	Margin vs Prev	Share
Unallocated	251K	+508.0%	-44.4%	+453.5pp	5%
Verde Blends	361K	+119.0%	35.7%	-4.8pp	8%

The two rows that stopped her: the only brand on the screen in red, and a green number too large to belong to anything real.

Everything on the screen was true. Whether it was the whole story was a different question, and dashboards don't answer those. She opened the Investigate tab and asked.

Ember & Oud is a sandbox company. Figures are illustrative.

INVESTIGATE

INSIDE LENS

Two questions later, the problem has an address.

Rank all outlets by gross margin for February 2026.

OKM0001 led February 2026 with an 87.4% gross margin; Unallocated (no outlet) ranked last at -44.4%.

Rank / Outlet	Gross margin	Rank / Outlet	Gross margin
1 · OKM0001	87.4%	9 · BLZ0002	51.5%
2 · CLW0002	82.8%	10 · FKD0001	42.9%
3 · OKM0002	80.7%	11 · RLT0002	42.3%
4 · CLW0001	74.3%	12 · VRD0001	40.6%
5 · BLZ0003	61.6%	13 · VRD0002	30.3%
6 · RLT0003	59.7%	14 · RLT0001	27.0%
7 · BLZ0004	58.0%	15 · Unallocated (no outlet)	-44.4%
8 · BLZ0001	56.2%		

Gross margin is gross revenue less food and packaging costs, divided by gross revenue. The ranking includes the unallocated bucket so all company activity is represented; its negative margin indicates costs not assigned to a specific outlet exceeded its revenue.

Source: Performance › By outlet · Feb 2026 Open in report ↗

Copy Export CSV gpt-5.6-sol

Question 1. All fourteen restaurants, ranked, plus the unallocated bucket so nothing is quietly dropped.

She didn't build a report or go hunting through tabs. She opened the Investigate tab and asked for the ranking, and **Lens computed it on the spot**, from OKM0001 at 87.4 percent down to RLT0001 at 27. Three of the four new restaurants landed roughly where a new site should. The fourth did not. **VRD0002**, Verde Blends' new opening, sat second from last at 30.3 percent, ten full points below its twin, which sells the identical menu out of the same kitchen. Same food, same recipes, same suppliers, ten points apart.

Then she asked for a comparison.

LENS zfenselabs.com Ember & Oud (Sandbox) Admin Avradip Mandal Sign out

Performance Revenue Cost Cash Flow Reconciliation Trends Investigate

Model gpt-5-mini ≡ History

Compare VRD0001 and VRD0002 for February 2026 — revenue, COGS and gross margin.

In Feb 2026 VRD0001 had higher margin: revenue 187.01K, COGS 111.02K, gross margin 40.63%; VRD0002 revenue 173.86K, COGS 121.15K, gross margin 30.32%.

Outlet	Gross revenue (Feb 2026)	COGS (Feb 2026)	Gross profit (Feb 2026)	Gross margin (%)
VRD0001	187.01K	111.02K	75.99K	40.63%
VRD0002	173.86K	121.15K	52.72K	30.32%

Source: Performance › By outlet for Feb 2026 (dashboard figures). Revenue is reported GROSS (per the dashboard conventions). The dashboard reports COGS as a negative P&L line; here COGS is shown as a positive cost for clarity. Gross margin = gross profit ÷ gross revenue. Figures are taken directly from the outlet P&L for each branch for Feb 2026 and therefore reconcile to the dashboard.

Source: Performance › By outlet · Feb 2026 Open in report ↗

Copy Export CSV gpt-5-mini

▸ How this was computed · 3 queries

Show month-by-month (Jan–Feb 2026) revenue and gross margin for VRD0001 and VRD0002. Break Feb 2026 COGS into food vs packaging for each outlet. Rank all outlets by gross margin for Feb 2026.

Question 2. Straight from the restaurant P&L, reconciled to the dashboard. The two sell within 8% of each other, so the gap is entirely in cost of goods.

VERDE BLENDS · FEB 2026	VRD0001	VRD0002	GAP
COGS % of revenue	59.37	69.68	+10.31 pts
Gross margin %	40.63	30.32	−10.31
Opex % of revenue	18.60	18.60	0.00
EBITDA %	**22.03**	**11.72**	**−10.31**

The EBITDA gap matches the COGS gap to two decimals: overhead contributes nothing to the spread. A point Claude later shows is truer, and less useful, than it looks.

WHERE A DASHBOARD STOPS

Investigate had done its job. Amira's remaining questions weren't lookups.

Two questions had produced two governed answers, each reconciled to the dashboard and showing the queries behind it. But what she was left wondering couldn't be answered by ranking or comparing anything. Was the wall of green even telling the truth? Was VRD0002's gap a real problem, or just the noise of a first month? And the question no dashboard ever volunteers: what could this ledger *not* prove?

Two questions in, the problem had an address. The next two were not lookups, so she opened Claude.

CLAUDE, ON THE SAME MCP SERVER

QUESTION 3

The first thing Claude did was disagree with the question.

The hand-off

So she opened Claude, already connected to the MCP server Lens runs on, and asked:

> Using the Zfense MCP for Ember & Oud: apply February 2026's brand-level gross margins to January's revenue mix. What would group gross margin have been, and how much of the actual decline is mix rather than trading?

Used Zfense MCP integration · 1 note

First, a flag on the premise

Group gross margin didn't decline. Ember & Oud's published figures show **54.8% in January → 56.4% in February**, a 1.6pt *improvement*, on revenue of 2,935,619 → 4,673,893.

There is a decline hiding underneath, but it only appears once you strip out the "Unallocated"

Question 3. Claude, on the Zfense MCP server under the same access rules, opens by refusing the premise rather than answering it.

Claude's answer began by taking her question apart. She had asked how much of the decline was mix, but as reported the margin on her dashboard had *risen* 1.6 points. What Claude showed her was that both stories were true at once. The reported improvement came mostly from the Unallocated bucket, which had been severely negative in January and was merely bad in February. The headline had been flattered by a residue shrinking, not by restaurants cooking better.

Strip the residue out, and margin had actually fallen. And the fall was entirely mix: every brand had traded as well as or better than in January. The growth had simply come from the lower-margin end of the portfolio, while Oak & Marble, the margin engine, shrank from a third of revenue to a quarter.

THE LIKE-FOR-LIKE SPLIT — ex-Unallocated

EFFECT	IMPACT
January actual	62.8%
Trading (brands improving)	+1.5 pts
Mix (where growth came from)	−2.1 pts
February actual	**62.2%**

Oak & Marble fell from 34.2% to 25.3% of revenue: −1.8 pts alone. Verde Blends growing at 35.7% costs −0.7; Clawpoint gives back +0.5.

QUESTION 4 · PUT A PRICE ON VRD0002 — The audit question

> Using ZfenseMCP for Ember & Oud: VRD0002 runs 10 points below VRD0001 on the same menu. Quantify the excess cost per month and annualized, and confirm whether it's food cost or overhead.

Question 4. Claude names the company it is querying rather than assuming one. Tenancy is explicit, never inferred.

The second answer put a price on it. Held at its twin's food-cost rate, VRD0002 was carrying **AED 17,929 of excess cost in February, around 215,000 a year** if it kept up. All of it was food cost, because the EBITDA gap matched the COGS gap to the second decimal.

That was the number Amira had come for. **Claude did not stop there.**

SAME SERVER, SAME RULES

Nothing about the ground rules changed with the tool: **Claude and ChatGPT** connect to the same MCP server, the same warehouse, the same conventions and access rules as the dashboard.

TWO AIS, ONE LEDGER · NO CONTRADICTION

Every figure ties out between Investigate and Claude, because both read the same published release under the same conventions: revenue gross, margins over gross revenue, restaurants keyed by slug. Working independently, the two put January's margin within a tenth of a point of each other.

THE CAVEATS

WHAT THE LEDGER CANNOT YET SUPPORT

Then Claude qualified its own number.

Unprompted, Claude gave three reasons not to take 215,000 to a board yet, each one checkable against the ledger. A dashboard produces answers; it does not produce an account of what its answers can and cannot support. That account turned out to be the most useful part of the afternoon.

1 It rests on a single first month
VRD0002 opened 1 February and posted nothing in January. Twenty-eight daily invoices confirm a full month, but opening waste, training batches, over-ordering and initial stock build routinely inflate month-one COGS by this order of magnitude, and opening inventory may have been expensed rather than capitalised. **Treat 215,000 as a ceiling, not a run rate, until March closes.**

2 "Food cost" cannot be narrowed further
COGS posts to a single account, `51100100`, COGS - Consolidated. The P&L vocabulary lists food and packaging separately, but the ledger has no split, so nobody can yet say whether this is yield, portioning, waste or packaging. **The purchase and stock-count lines behind that account are what to pull next.**

3 Overhead is exonerated by construction
Opex lands at exactly 18.60% of revenue for **every** restaurant in the company: a pro-rata allocation of a central pool, not captured spend. Overhead *cannot* differ between two restaurants in this dataset. So the finding is "the gap is in COGS", not "VRD0002's overhead is fine". Verde's brand-level opex is 21.19%, above the 18.60% pushed down.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS SHE ASKED

Nothing paraphrased

INVESTIGATE · 1

> Rank all outlets by gross margin for February 2026.

INVESTIGATE · 2

> Compare VRD0001 and VRD0002 for February 2026, revenue, COGS and gross margin.

CLAUDE · 3

> Using the Zfense MCP for Ember & Oud: apply February 2026's brand-level gross margins to January's revenue mix. What would group gross margin have been, and how much of the actual decline is mix rather than trading?

CLAUDE · 4

> Using ZfenseMCP for Ember & Oud: VRD0002 runs 10 points below VRD0001 on the same menu. Quantify the excess cost per month and annualized, and confirm whether it's food cost or overhead.

THE WHOLE INVESTIGATION, END TO END

One afternoon · no report built · nobody waiting on a specialist

THE DASHBOARD

A wall of green. Revenue +59%, margin +1.6pp, every brand up. True, and not the whole story. Two rows itch.

INVESTIGATE · Q1–2

The problem gets an address. Fourteen restaurants ranked; VRD0002 sits ten points below its twin, and the gap is all COGS.

CLAUDE · Q3

The premise gets corrected. As reported, margin rose. Like-for-like it fell **0.6pt**, and the fall is entirely mix.

CLAUDE · Q4

A number, and its limits. ~215K/yr of excess food cost at one restaurant, plus three reasons to verify before acting.

What this means for your company

If your group runs on Business Central across several companies or a dozen locations, your numbers already exist. The real question is how many days pass between a number moving and someone naming the restaurant behind it, the cost line behind that, and the reasons not to trust the figure yet.

For Amira it took one afternoon and four questions: a number, a counterfactual, and an honest list of what her ledger cannot yet support, which is exactly what you want in hand before a figure reaches a board.

WHERE EACH PIECE SITS

Core: live statements and Investigate.

Pro: Deep Dive, role-based access, and the MCP server for Claude or ChatGPT. Everything shown here.

Enterprise: payroll, POS and aggregator feeds land in the same warehouse, which turns allocated overhead into captured spend per restaurant and answers caveat three.

LENS

See this same investigation, end to end. The guided demo runs on the Ember & Oud sandbox.

Book a 30-minute guided demo · info@zfenselabs.com