

Retaining legacy of taste

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BUSTER**

The Chinese proverb 'wealth does not pass three generations', which means that the first generation builds the business, second take it forward and third blows up all, might sound appropriate for many legacy businesses globally. However, there are exceptions across sectors, including food, that are doubling up the fortunes based on their decade old legacy.

It is hard not to stop by the distinct aroma that comes from the narrow lane of Gali Kababiyān, near 17th-century mosque, Jama Masjid, in old Delhi, where Zaeemuddin Ahmed looks after the famous Karim's restaurant, which was started by his great-grandfather, Haji Karimuddin, in 1913. However, the roots of the legendary Karim's go back to the mid-19th century.

"Haji Karimuddin's father, Mohd Aziz, was a chef in the royal court of Red Fort. During 1857 mutiny, Aziz took shelter in Ghaziabad and decided to pass on the secret recipe of the royal food to his sons.

In 1911, during Delhi Durbar, Karimuddin set up a stall to sell aloo gosht (mutton with potatoes) and daal (lentil curry), which was an instant hit, and in 1913, he opened a small eatery by the name of Karim's," recalls Ahmed, who joined family business in 1999, when he was probably 20-years-old.

Today there are around 20 Karim's restaurants run by different family members, in Delhi NCR.

Ahmed says, for him it is business as usual. However, what unusual is despite a regular ambiance, without any technology integration in the back-end or front-end, any tie-ups for expansion, any changes in the recipes, Karim's has become synonymous with the Mughlai cuisine in North India. Ahmed says, that the taste and the relationships that his family

has built with each customer, has spread through word of mouth for Karim's, that has made it a significant brand name.

“ Our waiters take orders verbally; there is no need of paper or tablet. Also, we use our own spices, along with the market spices and store them, depending on the quantity required for each dish that is made exactly the way it was in 1913, and tastes same,” says Ahmed.

When it comes to expansion, Ahmed is strictly against franchising, which he believes will dilute the brand.

“ Franchisees won't be able to do justice with the way we make our dishes and the quality control we have. We don't want to dilute our brand name, otherwise we could have expanded to every Indian city through franchising,” claims Ahmed.

STANDARDIZING GROWTH

Unlike Ahmed, Monish Gujral, custodian of the famous Moti Mahal chain of restaurants that claims invention of tandoori cuisine and more has expanded from around 12 company-owned restaurants till 2004, to more than 150 of them through franchising. It went international in mid-2000.

Moti Mahal was started right after partition in 1948, when Gujral's grandfather Kundan Lal Gujral settled in India from Peshawar (Pakistan), where he had invented tandoori chicken. Gujral joined the business when he was 17, today he is 50. Gujral takes pride in reinventing the brand to what it is today, including standardizing all recipes and bringing a formal structure to the business.

For e. g., Gujral introduced the system of maintaining a manual for each recipe, which includes the number of ingredients, its quantity to avoid wastage. “ There was no recipe standard earlier. I realized that in order to expand it is important to have control over inventory, which was a big challenge for restaurant business, unlike in a jewelry shop, where you know how many pieces are sold,” says Gujral.

Moti Mahal own nine sub-brands including Moti Mahal, Moti Mahal Delux, Moti Mahal Delux Tandoori Trail, China Trail, Chaat Trail, Dosa Trail etc. Started in 1931, and now headed by third generation Tushar Chopra, Delhi based Kake Da Hotel also ventured into franchising to take the legacy forward. It currently has 10 restaurants franchised.

“ Even before I graduated, I knew that I have to expand it to grow the legacy. The important aspect to expansion was to franchise it. When I joined the company in 2009, I immediately set up three units and ran them as a franchisee model to understand how franchising works. I had to put standardization in place and also streamline the business,” says Chopra who joined the business in 2009. He adds,

“ Earlier it was a very labour intensive business and we were dependent on chefs to maintain the quality and taste. For this, I created a manual, which we referred to all the time to provide quality food and services. It is now like the bible of Kake Da Hotel.” Delhi-based fine dine Embassy restaurant, started in 1948, claims that haven’t even tweaked any of their dishes. Savar Malhotra, the third generation, currently runs three restaurants. “ We have added more items to our menu but haven’t changed or removed any dish.

For e. g., we added pasta,” says Malhotra, who joined Embassy around two-and-a-half years back, and boasts of having guests like Lord Mountbatten, Raj Kapoor, Yash Chopra, Rajendra Prasad etc., in the past.

Much like his father, Malhotra makes sure that he visits the restaurant once in two-three days to stay connected to the customer and his team personally, which he believes is the reason behind Embassy’s success. “ Food business is very personalized. I don’t mind taking orders or clearing plates, especially, when there is full occupancy. This makes me the part of the team, and that’s why we have employees working for last 35 years,” explains Malhotra, who brought operational changes, like taking orders on tablets, calculating the cost of each item in excel sheets, rather than papers. Legacy restaurants (50-year old or beyond) which are expanding are only handful, while others are just a standalone eateries. Nonetheless, both are holding their ground amidst the invasion of foreign chains even as this mix of the old and new guard is giving consumers options to drool over.

(This article first appeared in the Indian edition of Entrepreneur magazine (November 2016 Issue).