



Sabi spices it up

SABI SABHARWAL STARTED HIS RESTAURANT BUSINESS WITH ONE RESTAURANT IN 1995. WHAT STARTED AS A PASSION PROJECT HAS GROWN INTO A HUGELY SUCCESSFUL GROUP OF RESTAURANTS WHERE AUTHENTICITY AND QUALITY ARE PLACED FIRST.

WORDS: EUGENE YIGA (@eugeneyiga)

As a boy growing up in New Delhi, Sabi Sabharwal's favourite food was chicken sizzlers at The Claridges Hotel. But he also loved his family's cuisine. "My family is Punjabi, so rice, unless it was in the form of a biryani, was rarely eaten as an accompaniment," the 57-year-old recalls. "I distinctly remember hot puffed-up chapatis made fresh by the cook and brought to the table with rich chicken curries and dhal."

Sabi left India to do a BSc in electrical engineering at Caltech in the US, and majored in physics as well. He then completed a doctorate in theoretical particle physics. In 1995, he moved to South Africa.

"When my wife-to-be brought me to South Africa to meet her family in 1994, I fell in love with the country," he says. "I had been living in Los Angeles and Geneva for 13 years, so had adapted to life outside of India."

His family's business was mainly construction, but they also owned restaurants in India. It's why he was so passionate about food. It also explains why, with no premium north-Indian restaurants in Cape Town at the time, he saw a gap in the market to open his own.

"My family was surprised, as they saw me as an academic. Once I explained my reasons, they were supportive," he says. "It was also easy to set up a business in early 1995."

The biggest challenge was deciding on an area. With businesses moving to the Cape Town Foreshore, the city centre was dead. But Sabi was shown a great space in Church Street and took a chance. "I purchased the property so that I wasn't tied into a lease, and if the restaurant didn't do well, I could sell or change the business," he says. "But I was lucky. The restaurant became popular very quickly. As it was a destination restaurant, it helped to revive the city centre."

Since Bukhara first opened its doors in November 1995, it has been loved by locals and visitors alike. Sabi believes this is due to the consistently excellent quality of its food and the knowledge that the restaurant uses the best ingredients available. It maintains its authenticity by employing carefully selected and experienced Indian chefs.

"We renovated extensively after a small fire in the kitchen eight years ago and added more seats," he says. "We also hired more chefs from different regions in India and were able to introduce different dishes. Now, we're not only serving Punjabi cuisine."

Although the restaurant was profitable from the start, the new economic climate means it takes at

least two years to show profits for a new branch. Still, that hasn't stopped the franchise from expanding to Stellenbosch, Sandton and three other locations in Cape Town. It also hasn't stopped the group from launching two new restaurants: Haiku and Del Mar.

"We were in Singapore for a holiday, where we fell in love with the variety of Asian cuisine available there. We realised Cape Town needed a restaurant like this," Sabi says of Haiku, which opened in 2005. "Many patrons hadn't experienced the dishes we served, especially our dim sum. Well-travelled diners often compliment us, saying we're as good as any great restaurant in Singapore or Hong Kong."

Again, Sabi believes it comes down to consistency. He also cites the contemporary Asian-inspired moody interior and the fact that it was the first of its kind in South Africa: the restaurant prepares various types of Asian cuisine from five different open kitchens.

There's a similarly modern take on food served in a minimalistic interior at Del Mar, a Mexican restaurant in Camps Bay famous for its home-made tortillas and special herbs and spices that they import.

"We love good modern Mexican cuisine and Cape Town had nothing like it.

We decided to do some research, travelling to Mexico and the US to bring it home," Sabi says. "Diners who had experienced authentic modern Mexican were blown away. And diners whose only experience of Mexican was Tex Mex were slightly confused, expecting the cheesy usuals. However, we converted them quite easily.

"I overcome new and complex challenges on a daily basis," Sabi says. "I have to be in touch constantly, helping management make decisions on so many levels. But I have a responsibility to my family and employees, so I have to persist."

With spare time being so precious, Sabi hasn't done independent scientific research for years, although he does some reading to stay in the loop. Instead, he spends time with his family, sometimes cooking spicy eggs and bacon at midnight for his daughters at home. It's why he jokes that the only spare he has is "a couple of extra kilos" on his belly.

"I have some great ideas, but I'm considering partnerships for future expansions," he says. "There is interest from other parts in Africa, so I have to weigh up the options. The key is to follow your instincts and make sure you deliver a flawless product. Then traffic will come your way, no matter where you are." ●

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SABI'S RESTAURANTS
Bukhara is at 33 Church Street (021 424 0000), the V&A Waterfront (021 418 5600), the corner of Dorp Street and Bird Street in Stellenbosch (021 882 9133), the GrandWest Casino in Goodwood (021 535 4444), and Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton (011 883 5555). Visit www.bukhara.com.
Haiku is at 58 Burg Street in Cape Town (021 424 7000) and the V&A Waterfront (021 418 5700). Visit www.haikurestaurant.com.
Del Mar is on the Camps Bay Promenade (021 437 0333). Visit www.delmar.restaurant.