

INSIDE LOOK at Tokyo Express



In conversation with Arif Shafique, Co-owner, Tokyo Express

What inspired you to become a restaurateur?

I have always been interested in the restaurant business and dreamt of opening my own restaurant someday. This is a passion that grew from my travels with my father. When I was young, we would travel a lot and during those trips, we would always immerse ourselves into the cuisines of the respective destinations. This basically ignited my passion for food.

Simply put, my father has been my main inspiration throughout this journey. As I grew up, I noticed that Dhaka city held lots of opportunities and had room for the growth of new restaurants and cuisines. I wanted to give something different to the people of Dhaka city and it was my father who gave me the courage I needed to initiate this journey.

Previously, we did not have many varieties in terms of restaurants and I wanted to change that. But, unfortunately, I did not have much experience or knowledge in this field. With



little to no expertise, I dove into the restaurant business and my very first restaurant was Fool's Diner which is a casual dining restaurant catering mainly to the younger

generation. I opened this restaurant with my friend and business partner, Sabbir Amin, about eight years ago. The idea that went behind this restaurant was to have a place that offered affordable Thai and Japanese fusion food that would not make a mark on a student's pocket.



Two years into opening Fool's Diner, I was approached by some investors with whom we established Tokyo Express, which is a Japanese fusion restaurant that caters to a family-friendly crowd.

What challenges did you face?

There were mainly two challenges that I faced initially: convincing my family and overcoming societal hurdles. My family was completely against the idea of opening a restaurant in the beginning since it went against the norm of having a 9-to-5 job. The next big challenge was our inexperience in this field and we had to learn everything from scratch. So, we had to figure out all the big and small details by ourselves, starting with the basics such as the pricing of the food, customers' demands and more nuanced issues such as the distance between two tables. Even when it came to dealing with our customers, we realised that our perception might differ completely from theirs and the food and menu had to be set according to that. Every-



thing that I have learnt so far came through a lot of trials and errors.

Not all of my restaurant ventures were successful either. I had two restaurants, Amigos (a Mexican restaurant) and Little Korea that had to be shut down because there was not a bigger market for these cuisines at the time. However, these setbacks were a good learning experience.

How do you manage everything and what drives you?

What really drives me is my passion. I look forward to working at my job every day. At this point, managing it all has become almost like second nature for me. Before the pandemic, I used to regularly visit both the restaurants and I tried to build a good relationship with all my customers by always making myself available to them for any queries or criticisms.



What steps have you taken for your restaurants to adapt to the new normal?

After the pandemic emerged, we were closed for three months. Then we slowly started opening up again with all the necessary precautions. At the entrance of our restaurants, we provide sanitisation to our customers and there are also hand sanitisers placed at every table. Every morning, all the tables and chairs are disinfected before service begins and then we disinfect tables again after every meal.

Moreover, we ensure gloves and masks for all our employees and to comply with social distancing measures, we have cut down our seating capacity to 50 percent. Since our takeaway orders have increased in the current situation, we make sure that our food parcels also undergo the disinfection measures. We have implemented further safety measures for our employees by ensuring housing for them near our restaurants.

Overall, although the current situation has been challenging, we are trying our best to make ends meet and I believe we have adapted well due to our understanding landlords and customers. Apart from this, there is not much that we can do during these uncertain times.



What are your suggestions for aspiring restaurateurs?

Opening a new restaurant is a lot more difficult now. You really need to be single-mindedly involved in this business to be successful. Having a proper outline and proposition of the idea for your restaurant is very important.

Throughout my years, I have also learnt the significance of good and reliable employees and staff members. Managing the staff and gaining their trust is of utmost importance because then you will have employees who will support you and stay with you through all the difficulties. I have employees that have stayed with me for the entirety of my eight years in this business.



What surprises may Dhaka expect from you in the future? Are there any upcoming projects?

I had a lot of different things in mind but unfortunately the pandemic has put everything to a halt for the time being. Hopefully, if by next year everything returns to normal, we have plans to expand both the restaurants. I also have plans for a new Chinese restaurant in mind but it all depends on when normalcy returns.

The interview was taken by Tasnim Kabir of The Daily Star.