

## INSIDE LOOK at Ajo Idea Space



### In conversation with Khalid Mahmud

Ajo has established itself as a thought leader in revolutionizing how a restaurant should operate in Dhaka, focusing not only on food, but also providing a different ambience for its consumers. How did the inspiration strike you?

I had a couple inspiration. I wanted to contribute in reality, not only on the surface level. I wanted to connect with people in reality with a simple thing outside my artistic work. I traveled in a lot of countries because of my art and I saw how people in some countries valued every single job as essential. So, when a lot of people told me not to go into this business, out of fear or laughter, I did not get frazzled by their words. I found the idea of opening up a place where people can come, relax and even brainstorm ideas in an ideal place very comforting and simple.

My family business was food as well. My family has been in the business of food for nearly 60 years. Growing up, I saw my father work in his small local bakery for a long time and saw him being happy

where he was. I wanted to urbanize his idea of delivering quality food and keep the legacy of our food business alive through Ajo.

#### What challenges did you face initially?



My background was not something related to food or the restaurant business. But, when I was constructing Ajo, I realized that it did not fall into a restaurant category, we were more in relax dining and fine casual category. I wanted to focus on the space more, because this was the bigger part of our story, food is just a small part. We wanted focus on creating a space where you will come with your friends and family and create wonderful memories. Next, we wanted to focus on our pricing. Anyone can procure coffee and sell them, the main thing is to give the best quality of coffee in a price where most people could afford it and we can sustain our business as well. Designing a process of delivering quality food at an affordable price is more important than designing interior. We wanted to keep our interior simple, keep the price of food right and provide quality food. And if you look at our interior, furniture's and everything, it is all refurbished items that we have collected to make it more environmentally friendly. Metals that were thrown away, wood boards from old ships and other things have been refurbished and made into materials that we can use in our restaurant and make it environmentally sustainable, organic and simple.



Ajo has managed to stay as one of the hangout spots in Dhaka for many years now. How did you manage to keep it relevant for so long in an age where consumers rapidly move on to newer things?

I don't like to think that I have competitors. Competitor word belongs to a kind of a war mentality. I just want my space to exist and work in a sustainable way. Newer restaurants are more and more getting dependent in their interior, flashiness and other stuff that are constantly increasing their operational cost. I try to cut back on those operational costs through new innovations and try to keep my prices constant so that customers don't hesitate to come to my restaurant by looking at the prices. I don't use AC in Ajo because the architectural design of Ajo is done in a way that there is constant air flow within the restaurant. Simple design,



interior, tranquility and quality food will drive the customers in no matter what. I also try to treat my employees as colleagues rather than employees and make them feel a part of my establishments. They are always paid on time, their medical expenses is taken care of if they get into an accident and I even rented them an apartment to stay together.

#### What are the steps you have taken for your restaurants to adopt to the new normal?

Our business policies of cutting cost and not over extending our operational costs have helped us in keeping our business afloat during the pandemic. We have trained the people who worked in Ajo through the help of health expert. We also constantly share videos from YouTube about this matter within our working group. We also have hand sanitizers in all the tables for the safety of our customers and the whole establishment is constantly being clean as well. We use Evaporator Machines as well where we use a certain chemical that travels through the air to kill germs in the vicinity.



#### We have seen a lot of people trying their hands in different cuisine during the lockdown. Any advice for the aspiring Chefs/home cooks of Dhaka?

My advice for them is to completely go for it. Jump at any opportunity they can get their hands on. Because we don't have enough Job for the people who are graduating every year. Hence, they need to use these opportunities to make their own establishments or earning source. So, Young Entrepreneurs should make use of these opportunities for the betterment of themselves. Lastly, I would say for them to love this city. If you love your city, treat it kindly, it will love you back.

#### We know you are not someone to stay quiet for long. Any exciting news for coming anytime soon?



Next for us is to make a new Ajo, with a new architect and a new language. But we are yet to decide on a place where we could construct it. We have a foundation as well, which is called "Satori", which is a meditation practice & research establishment. So we are now doing meditation as well, apart from food and gastronomy. So, if you're looking for peace in your mind and soul, you can seek Satori out.

The interview was taken by Foysal Mahmud Niloy.  
Photo: Prabir Das

