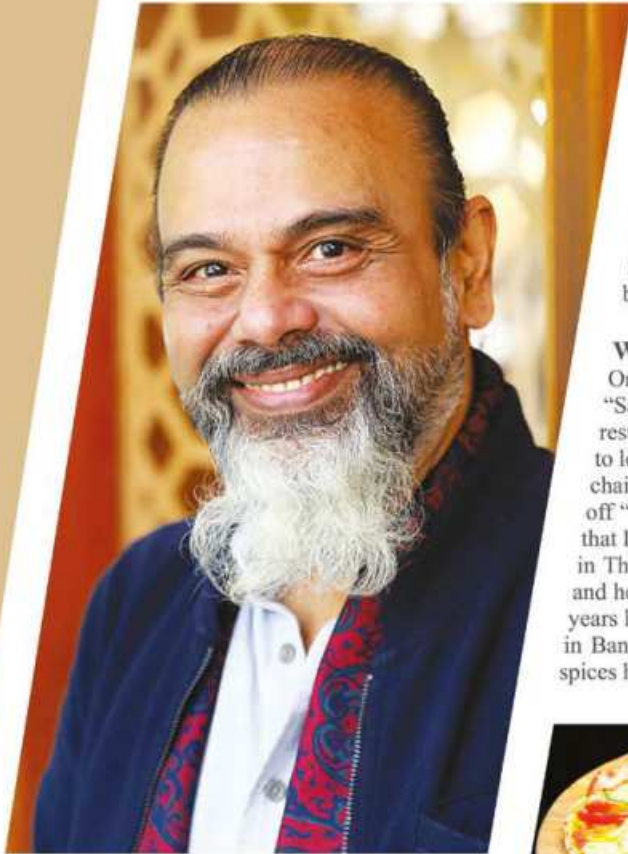


# INSIDE LOOK

## at Saltz, El Toro & Raffinato



*In conversation  
with  
Iftekhar Ahmed Khan*

**What inspired you to become a restaurateur? Where did it all begin?**

My journey almost 37 years ago when I was doing summer jobs at restaurants in Chicago while I was going to college. The thing that inspired me at that time was the hospitality that was provided through this industry and satisfying their culinary needs. I began rising through the ranks and became a Certified Trainer for the company "El Torito", who had about 280 restaurants in the US. I was in charge of training the management, cooks and other personnel in the Mid-West region. Back in 1989 I decided to move back to Bangladesh and looking for ways to open up my own restaurant. Working with El Torito was the fundamental thing that inspired me to open a Mexican restaurant in the beginning. When I formulated the plans to open "El Toro", everyone close to me was saying what a bad idea it was, because people's culinary pallet in this country was not rich enough. But I had faith in my background knowledge of the industry and started it out in 1994 in Dhanmondi. As soon as I was up and running, people responded very



well to it, especially the foreigners that lived here. When El Toro was established, I thought about venturing into some new form of cuisine. A school friend of mine approached me about opening up a sea-food restaurant in Dhaka. Same thing happened, people told me I've gone mad and nobody would eat Sea-food



here. But I thought, if I could make a Mexican restaurant work here, I can make Sea-food work as well. That's when I established "Saltz". When Saltz became a success as well, I thought about venturing out again. So, I spent 5 years of my time researching and honing the skills & resources to open up an Italian Fine Dining restaurant. So, when we finally came up with a menu for it, we opened up "Raffinato". So, this was the beginning of my culinary journey.

**What challenges did you face initially?**

One of initial challenges that I faced when opening up "Saltz" was procuring fresh sea fish to serve at my restaurant. I had to travel to Chittagong and Cox Bazar to look into suppliers who can set me up with a supply chain of fresh fish. Then initially when I was starting off "El Toro", it was difficult for me to get the spices that I needed locally. But, luckily I had two colleagues in Thailand who were in the Mexican spice business and helped me import the spices that I needed. As the years have gone by, all those spices are now available in Bangladesh and that challenge of importing those spices have greatly been reduced.



**You have managed to stay as one of the most diverse restaurants in Dhaka where you came up with Mexican cuisine, Italian cuisine, seafood etc. What's your secret in sustaining so well over the years, while others have not done as well enough?**

In this business, I believe in 3 things. Quality, Service and Cleanliness. This is my philosophy in my businesses. I don't make any compromises in these. I won't serve you any Sub-par food in my restaurant, if I don't have it, I will tell you straightforwardly. I make sure to train every single personnel that I hire into the company. So that they know my standard and uphold them. Over the years, people have sing praises of my restaurants for upholding these standards and values.



Cleanliness is also one of our fundamental things, the kitchen, staff and overall atmosphere is always clean and people always appreciates it. I don't look for mediocrity, I always look for excellence. That sort of made me and restaurants an instant success and people took notice to that.

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

For the restaurant, we are deep cleaning it on a monthly basis. Daily cleaning has been severely amped up as well, with surfaces at the tables and door handles being cleaned with surface disinfectants. There's Hand Sanitizers in every table and we have made no exception in choosing out the best one. We also check the temperature of the guests at the entrance and mask is mandatory as well. Our staffs are always wearing masks and Face Shields for both their safety and the customers.

**We have seen a lot of people trying their hands in different cuisines during the lockdown. Any advice for the aspiring chefs/home-cooks of Dhaka?**

I think it is very good to see people getting into cooking. In Bangladesh, we have certain stereotypes. Guys are not supposed to cook, that's the general attitudes. But it's actually guys who are leading the kitchens in this industry. It's also good for society. Once you get into this habit of



cooking, whether it be male or female, you're contributing to your family, particularly to your near ones. I think it has helped young couple's bond and share responsibilities during the lockdowns as well. I only hope this habit continues. My message for those who are venturing out into business through home cooking is to avoid copying others work. Be original, creative and create your own style of cooking. You must study and research to develop your skill and culinary pallet.

**We know you are not someone to stay quiet for long and you have been expanding your footprint all over Dhaka city. Any exciting news for expanding into other cities of BD anytime soon?**



I am setting up an exciting catering business in the coming months. All my restaurants are set up and I can give my utmost effort into constructing it. I want to take catering service to another level. I will do from corporate dinners to personal catering for your personal intimate vents. All the dishes, silverware and everything will be of high end. Every single thing will deliver a message about my product. The guys who'll serve will look better than the guests so to speak. This is the way I want to go with this venture. I am very passionate and excited about it moving forward.

*The interview was taken by Foysal Mahmud Niloy.  
Photo: SK ENAMUL HAQ*