

INSIDE LOOK at Spaghetti Jazz



In conversation with Shaheen Khan, Owner, Spaghetti Jazz

What inspired you to become a restaurateur? What were the goals behind creating and designing Spaghetti Jazz?

Since my husband and I used to travel often, the idea of opening an Italian restaurant in Bangladesh occurred to me when I noticed that pizza, pasta and spaghetti are among the most popular food globally. Also, since childhood, my biggest passion was cooking, hence, I did not delay and started Spaghetti Jazz in March 1994.

Initially, an Italian couple helped me run the restaurant. They were with me on a three-year contract.

Following their idea, we started live Jazz music once a month. The name and the décor have been derived from this jazz concept. I have personally hand-picked most decorations posters of Jazz musicians from around the world.

Since its inception, my first priority has been to provide outstanding service. Every other year, I visit Italy and take lessons at a cooking school in order to upgrade my skills that help me to update the menu.



What challenges did you face? How did you overcome them? What has been your biggest achievement?

I was the first female to open my own restaurant back then and had hired waitresses. When I noticed the female staff having difficulty working late hours (due to the roads not being female friendly after dusk), I made arrangements to drop them off after 10.30 pm every day.

Another challenge has been that it is very expensive to run a restaurant in this era, especially in terms of rent for commercial space.

Two years back, I was in London, watching a programme called "Ready, Steady, Cook" by BBC. The host was speaking to a lady whom she was seeing after a long time and asked where she was. The lady replied that she was in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The host then presumed that she must have tasted a lot of curry and rice in here then. To my astonishment, she said



that she had the best pizza here in a place called Spaghetti Jazz. Later, BBC did a taping of my restaurant, and aired it on that TV show. I consider this my biggest achievement.

I have opened two more restaurants; one Thai restaurant named, Pan Tao and another one called Turkish Bazaar, my most recent business. I am glad that it gives me a reason to visit Turkey every three to four months.

Please share your views on the food industry/restaurant sector in Bangladesh. What are the factors that set apart Spaghetti Jazz from other restaurants?

When I initiated Spaghetti Jazz, there were only a handful of good restaurants. I have struggled when the restaurant culture was on the rise. A lot of people opened Italian restaurants and I can even recall a few that tried to copy us. The difference is that nobody could maintain the quality like we did. I am a chef, and I know each and every item in the menu by heart, unlike most owners. I am not scared of competition



because I know where my strength lies. Moreover, chefs visiting top-notch hotels like Le Meridien or the embassies visit us and train my chefs for free since I do charity work and know them personally from my culinary school.

Till date, Spaghetti Jazz is one of the most consistent restaurants in Dhaka City in terms of the quality of food and overall management.

I have opened a couple of branches of Spaghetti Jazz including one in Chef's Table, Dhanmondi. Though commute is difficult due to traffic jam, I still do not let my restaurants run without my supervision. I personally make sure that the food that is coming out of my kitchen, tastes right. If it doesn't, it is not served. The mobile court has visited my restaurant a number

of times. In this era where restaurants are being fined or closed down because of unhygienic cooking conditions and expired products, I can proudly say that every time, they have walked out with zero complaints.

Besides Spaghetti Jazz, you are involved in philanthropic activities. Please share how your business helps you to carry on with these activities.



I run a school for under-privileged children called Piet Van School in Baridhara J-block. I invest all the profits I make from my business in running this school. The idea behind this came from an interesting incident. One morning, as I was travelling in my car, I noticed a woman teaching 20 street children on the footpath in Gulshan-2. I stopped my car and upon inquiring, she informed me that she teaches these children while their mothers are away for work. I asked her if she would be interested if I give them a proper place to run this school, and she readily agreed. Then, I started looking for a place in Badda. The location for my school had to be in the same area as the children, or else they wouldn't continue. A woman, named Mohini, is currently the headmistress of my school.

What would be your suggestion for young people who aspire to become restaurateurs? How can they prepare for challenges?

It is great to know that the young people are aspiring to become restaurateurs. If you notice, every month, several new restaurants are opening and some existing ones are closing down. The problem here is that nobody does the homework before stepping up to become an entrepreneur. The key to becoming a restaurateur is to know your cuisine. I know every recipe of the menu thoroughly and my staff cannot bluff me.

To maintain the quality of the restaurant, I look after my staff well. I pay them sufficiently, and help their family as much as I can. I have the same people serving me for years. If the staff keeps changing, they don't get enough time to settle in, which hampers the service quality.

Such attention to detail is vital for becoming successful entrepreneur. It is important to always stay prepared for hurdles and stay positive so that you can pull back up.

What is your future plan?

My future plans for Spaghetti Jazz and my school are interlinked. I started my school with 20 children in class one. Today, I have 160 children studying till class five. These children are my inspiration for putting more effort behind the restaurant right now. I have plans to expand my school till grade ten so that students can sit for SSC exams.

