

## INSIDE LOOK at Kiva Han



### In conversation with Samit Bin Salam

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

When I was in England for my Bachelor's degree in Architecture & Civil Engineering, I got entrenched in their coffee culture. There was an established student culture, where we went to café's nearby the university during our break time to do our course work or brainstorm ideas. While going there regularly, I realized there were no café's that were upscale and only focused on coffee back home. It was the early 2000 and coffee culture in Bangladesh was almost Non-existent. Hence I wanted to establish something similar to those Café's in England that solely focused on coffee. That was my first reason for opening Kiva Han. At the same time I read an article on "The Economist" about Commodities. It was mentioned there that Coffee was the 2nd most traded commodity in the world after Oil, which I had no idea about since I was a student of architecture. From reading a random business article, the

inception of the idea occurred and I started thinking of doing something with coffee when I go back to Bangladesh.



Then I dove right into the world of coffee and started researching about coffee, coffee beans and the culture surrounding it. Whilst doing my research, I unearthed Kiva Han from the history books. Kiva Han is a Turkish word that means Coffee House, and it was also the name of the first coffee shop in the world. I



was surprised to learn that nobody in the world was using this name to establish a coffee brand, not even the world's biggest brands like Starbucks, Costa Coffee was using it. Therefore, I saw a golden opportunity here and started establishing Kiva Han as a Brand in Bangladesh. Turkey was rich in Coffee culture and I thought I would emulate that rich coffee culture in Bangladesh through Kiva Han.

I also wanted to highlight my own architectural expertise by exhibiting art and culture related to coffee in my interior of the shop. You will see if you visit all of my outlets that I tried to portray infographics or art related to coffee, its culture and its history. Thereupon, Kiva Han started its journey here in Bangladesh.

#### What challenges did you face initially?

My family was very skeptical in the beginning because my background was not related to food and beverages. Other than that, Real Estate was a major



challenge since I had no partners and I had to procure the budget myself. My father helped me out at launching my first outlet in Gulshan-1. I wanted to open Kiva Han in 2007, but had to wait until April of 2013 to properly collect the funds to get the balls rolling. We started to get a lot of corporate contracts from the end of 2013 and never looked back. These corporate contracts has helped us in opening more outlets throughout Dhaka. We have contracts with corporations like GrameenPhone, Unicef, British American Tobacco etc.

**Kiva Han has managed to stay as one of the best café's in Dhaka, despite facing some formidable competition over the years. What's your secret in sustaining so well over the years, while others have not done as well enough?**



My father was an Army Personnel, so I grew up in an army family. Hence, I got exposed and accustomed to working in a military style from an early age. Initially when I started, half of my operations personnel were Ex-military people and they ran the operations, procedures and developments in a style that was very constructive. I was never in the army, but I tried to run my organization like it's the army. Another competitive advantage for us is that we have reinvested almost 100% of our profits back in the business to accelerate the growth to this day. Our management has always been run on a constant development and growth mindset.

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

When we got permission reopen our café's again, we trained our full team with professionals about how to properly maintain hygiene within our café's. We have substantially invested a lot in maintaining hygiene. From the moment you walk into our café's to the moment you left, we are constantly disinfecting everything. We also "Deep Clean" all our outlets once a week, from floor to ceiling, disinfect the places from any threats and make it safe and sound for people to pay a visit. Nevertheless, the seating arrangement is still very limited to maintain social distancing guidelines.



#### We have seen a lot of people trying their hands in baking during the lockdown. Any advice for the aspiring Bakers of Dhaka?

Yes, I've seen that the number of aspiring bakers are on the rise right now. It's very good for all parties. It is very self-sustaining and we will see a lot of innovation coming from that side. They are kind of working like freelancers to cater to a niche, more personalized customer base, which will in turn expose more people to these type of food. Which in turn will enrich people's taste pallets and coerce them into coming to café's like Kiva Han to get a premium products at a reasonable price.



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

Well I had an idea for an event, but it got delayed because of the Pandemic. We have now planned out that, since Kiva Han had started its journey through coffee, we are going to orchestrate Bangladesh's first coffee festival after the pandemic which will include all the other industry partners as well to make it more cohesive. The coffee culture in Bangladesh is on a rapid rise and I am certain that we will see a massive turnout of coffee lovers once we organize the festival.