

INSIDE LOOK at Cilantro



In conversation with Ashik Ur Rahman

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

I went to Monash University in Malaysia for Higher Education and when I came back, I saw that there was a lack of place where you could just sit down, have a cup of coffee or meal and properly relax, especially in Dhanmondi. I think Café Mango was the only café at that time in this part of the town. So at that time, me with 2 more directors were concocting the ideas for starting something related to food in this area. The previous land owner of this place was a nice guy and gave us a favorable rate for rent so that we can start our business there. I should remind you that we built the complete restaurant from the ground up. There was no buildings or house that we rented or renovated to construct Cilantro. As a result, if you look at the architecture of the restaurant, you'll notice our ceilings are almost 16 feet and the unique atmosphere that surrounds our establishment was carefully and meticulously constructed by ourselves. You can see there is an open place in the middle and we thought rain water would come down that part and create an environment that no one has ever seen. Our menus are predominately Latin & Mediterranean inspired dishes and have been refined over the years with respect to our customer's opinion.



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What challenges did you face initially?

The first challenge that we faced initially was managing



our produce. We started Cilantro almost 10 years ago and at that time products such as Steaks, Salmon fish, and fresh & premium spices like rosemary and thyme, were not widely available in our country. Only dried version of those spices were available, and they were tough to find as well. Steaks and Salmon were products that were mainly served in 5 star restaurants. Therefore, it was very costly for us to acquire the products that we needed. Nevertheless, these products are very easy to obtain nowadays, thanks to the super shops and various other suppliers of fish and meat. Flavorful sauces and dips were not that available in this region at that time. Hence, we started making our own sauces and dips by using fresh produces. We faced some issues with consistency at the beginning as well. Nonetheless, we quickly bounced back from that by assembling 4 different mix of spices (which consists of 28-30 different spices), that focuses on different style of cuisines and using those exact mix of spices in every branch to keep consistency within them. We also have specified supplier to get high-quality potatoes as well. Another factor that helps us get the edge over our competition is that we priorities and spend a substantial amount



of money to keep our kitchens up to date. We are always using state of the art equipment's, as well as hiring professional & experienced chefs for our kitchens.

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

Loyal customers, plain and simple. They are the ones that have mainly helped us in sustaining ourselves for so many years and expand into different areas. These regular customers are very satisfied with our hospitality, as well as the food and they keep coming back on a regular basis. Moreover, another key factor for us staying one step further is our staff. Most of the staff here in cilantro, has been with us for more than 8 years and have remained loyal to our restaurant. They are professionally trained and



are dedicated to their work in delivering optimal customer service.

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

We have practically made our own bubble to combat with this issue. All the staff that you see here, live in the same house. Even if they go on holidays, they cannot join back with us before quarantining for 14 days. That helps us make sure that there are no risks of that person being in the restaurant or in the kitchen. 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.

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?

Just be consistent. Don't serve food that you yourself will not eat. You have to like the food yourself well enough for it to be served to others. So pay close attention to that. Furthermore, have a specialized menu. Don't go haywire and adopt 3-4 different cuisines all together at the beginning. You need to practice a specific cuisine a thousand times before getting it absolutely right, and adopting too many cuisines in the beginning will dampen that process. Our team believes in this concept as well. They especially need to remember that the kitchen is the heart of any house or restaurant.



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

We have carried out this process before already. We had opened 2 branches in Uttara and Baridhara, but had to close those down because of different circumstances. We tried running a university cafeteria as well. The university being IUB. But it wasn't a strong financial base as well and we closed operations there as well. Now we have gone into a



working relationship with United Group. We have an outlet of Cilantro in all the Chef's Table in Dhaka. They are also planning on opening up a couple more Chef's Table and we will open outlets there as well. We were approached by some enthusiastic people from Sri Lanka and UK, saying they wanted to become partners with us. However, these conversations were scrapped and put on the shelves because of the pandemic. So, we'll see if we can open outlets outside the country later in the future.

The interview was taken by Foysal Mahmud Niloy.
Photo: Orchid Chakma