

GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

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Dhaka's online food business

#FOOD

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

The lockdown-days of the coronavirus outbreak gave many a second chance to rediscover their inner fortes. While some resorted to taking up the pen or the painting brush, others looked deep into their recipe books and some honed their baking skills. Quite a few took the next, not necessarily the obvious, step!

Luna Marium, 42, an enterprising mother, started her own cloud kitchen during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering baked goodies — both sweet and savoury.

"Papia's Delicacies" started in September 2020 and my passion and love towards baking food is what makes the venture special to me," said Marium.

The main incentive for opening the 'ghost kitchen' were her children.

"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, I began to cook various dishes from a wide range of cuisines almost every day. Inspired by the positive response I got, I was motivated enough to share my food with others and start my own catering business," she added.

Marium is not alone in this. Over the last one year, many a soul who enjoy cooking have opened up their virtual kitchens through the social networking site, Facebook.

The catering venture Domachha delivers food only on weekends, and is the collaborative effort of a mother-daughter duo.

Kazria Kayes, is a successful marketer, and a former popular RJ. Her mother is someone who simply loves to cook and always wanted to have her own restaurant, serving delectable Bengali cuisine. Being a full-time development worker, Meherun Nahar Shapnanever



simpler to set up. Unlike a proper restaurant with a physical outlet, which in Dhaka, can be a million-taka affair, the prospect of setting up a virtual kitchen remains within a small budget.

The need for a prime location disappears as delivery services like Foodpanda and Pathao Food makes it possible to deliver within a wide area.

However, the biggest advantage of having a social media presence is that of promotion. Reviews in various food related groups and word of mouth are enough for most businesses to thrive.

"My business is totally dependent on social media, from advertising to taking orders, it all happens on social media. It has had a massive contribution towards setting and growing my business, Papia's Delicacies," said Lubna Marium. Commenting on how Facebook has influenced their business, Md Ali

"A lot of businesses were closed at the start of COVID-19. That was an opportunity for us to spread our love for food," said Md Ali Chowdhury, who manages the social media aspect of Sharmin's Creations, yet another business initiative that opened during the pandemic.

had the opportunity to achieve that dream.

"2020 was a blessing in disguise as both of us were working from home. We finally grabbed the opportunity to start my mother's dream venture on a small scale," Kazria said.

However, not everyone had such casual beginnings.

Moshiur Rahman runs a travel agency, which was suffering from financial setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Movements across the country had ceased, let alone international travel. This meant people were staying more at home, especially in the initial days, as health was a major concern, most refrained from going out.

Rahman took this opportunity and decided to make the best out of it by starting his own cloud kitchen. Now, he employs several to run his successful side business.

These are just some of the inspiring stories that we heard surrounding opening of cloud kitchens during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Business amidst a health crisis

The near three-month lockdown meant that people simply could not go out to have food. A lot of restaurants went bankrupt during this time. Cloud kitchens in Dhaka came out as godsend to fill this gap.

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who manages the social media aspect of Sharmin's Creations, yet another business initiative that opened during the pandemic.

Cloud kitchens offered people the chance to maintain safety measures and still enjoy the food they missed. Besides, it gave a lot to people, mostly women, although successful in their own right, a chance to discover their entrepreneurial skills.

"COVID-19 also presented as a blessing for our mum to transform herself into a businessperson," Chowdhury added.

Kazria Kayes voiced a similar opinion. "As we started our venture during the pandemic, the influence was rather positive. Our customers really appreciate that our food is home cooked and the fact that we deliver taking maximum safety precautions possible."

"We take our food hygiene very seriously. As we are still delivering the food from our own kitchen, we make sure all the raw vegetables and meat are properly cleaned. We deliver food with 3-layer packaging and also attach alcohol pads with the parcel so that our customers can clean the boxes before serving," Kazria added.

The boon of Facebook
It is not only the thrifty marketing strategy that Facebook allows that drew countless individuals in opening cloud kitchens in the last one year.

Compared to brick-and-mortar restaurants, virtual kitchens are much



Chowdhury exclaimed, "Immensely, if not completely!"

A way to success

Focused on food delivery rather than dine-in services, cloud kitchen is nothing new as a concept. Since the coronavirus unsettled the conventional food industry, its popularity has been unprecedented

"The restaurant business has been a profitable one but with its own share of difficulties; taking it online doesn't make much of a difference," said Rahman.

"One of the biggest open secrets to success in this business is maintaining the kitchen. Preserving high standards in terms of quality of food that is being served and being cautious about lowering costs has been the perennial struggle.

"The cloud kitchen only eliminates the décor of the restaurant, the cost of maintaining staff is cut down. But the underlining principal of the food business remains the same," he added.

But for most, pandemic-time cloud kitchens have been more than just a money-making venture.

"Our profit is very marginal, but it is not about the money. My mother has always wanted to be an independent woman and more importantly, a mother who wanted to share her love for cooking," said Choudhury of Sharmin's Kitchen.

Despite the humble beginning that they had, all our interviewees expressed their conviction to open a physical outlet as soon as possible.

Choudhury said, "We have tried different methods, from selling in Cookups, to investing in Facebook marketing — a little this and a little that. Our goal is to earn enough customer trust to the point where we can generate revenue that we can use to get a small physical outlet. Our kitchen would still be the same because we don't want to compromise with our quality and hygiene."

Kazria Kayes and Domachha has already expanded, but wishes to remain comparatively small in the near future.

"Currently, we are active on two social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram. We advertise from our pages and also share our weekly menu in relevant food groups.

"As the volume of our orders are increasing day by day, we are shifting our kitchen to a bigger place from January. We are also planning to arrange monthly pop up lunches as soon as the situation gets back to normal," she said.

The future

The whole affair of cloud kitchen rests on online promotions and word of mouth. Currently, most of the kitchens that have become operational since the onset of the pandemic are able to cope with the customer demand.

Filling orders seem lucrative because as you do well, the customer base grows, meaning one needs to expand. Unless one is prepared, it can never be easy.

One of the contributing factors of the soaring popularity of cloud kitchens is that they provide contactless service. However, this means that the need for maintaining a logistic support system is important. Hygiene is also more important now than ever before.

However, as far as COVID-19 is concerned, there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel. Vaccines are already being distributed and hopefully, this cloud overshadowing our lives will pass.

What will happen to the cloud kitchen culture in post-pandemic Dhaka remains to be seen. They had a fantastic start as people began to adapt to the new normal. And acclimatising was the key. It is clear that to survive a post pandemic wave, the kitchen we just visited will have to adapt, and re-adapt to keep running.

Photo: Kazria Kayes
Model: Homechef Meherun Nahar Shapna



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