



## DINING CONCEPTS LTD

# Man with the Midas Touch

His passion for service, devotion to the craft of hospitality, people skills, and unshakable conviction in putting his best foot forward, comprise the secrets of Dining Concepts Ltd. Please meet SANDEEP SEKHRI.



Sandeep Sekhri and Sandip Gupta, with new concepts in the works.

**S**niffing out a good opportunity is second nature to entrepreneur cum restaurant czar Sandeep Sekhri. Founder and Managing Director of the celebrated culinary and hospitality group, Sekhri's Dining Concepts stands shoulders above others in Hong Kong's highly competitive food & beverage industry.

Brilliant new Bread Street Kitchen & Bar, a British-European-styled restaurant

starring celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's personal favorites and all-time classics, opened recently at the Lan Kwai Fong Hotel in Central to thunderous applause.

The UK culinary giant's first venture in the Asia Pacific region further solidifies the company's position as a most sought out, reliable partner and an authority in food services, adding to an impressive portfolio of high-profile collaborations.

Like all its offerings, Bread Street

Kitchen & Bar showcases heights of meticulous execution, of both design and service promise. Even more astounding is that it is the fifth restaurant the company has launched within a year.

Ever the humble visionary, Sekhri's pragmatic view on success shines forth as he acknowledges the limits that Dining Concepts has crossed. "We've been biting more than we can chew through the years," says Sekhri. "I somehow find it very hard to say no, or to stop. This has

been a shortcoming on my part. Our biggest obstacle is the fact that we just keep going on. It's sometimes detrimental to your health."

## Defying Gravity

It normally takes six to nine months between planning and launching a restaurant, reveals Sekhri. Two to three new establishments in a year is a reasonable pace for Dining Concepts. With five in 2014, they did the uncanny - if they had not already.

"What we do is a natural mistake," Sekhri shares. "One should not be doing what we do: different restaurants, cuisines, chefs, menus, different egos to take care of. That's not a smart way of doing things. I won't recommend this to anyone else."

Despite the inherent risks, Sekhri pushes forth, relying on vast industry experience to see the company through. "We just do it just because this is our DNA. We understand how to execute a brand, how to execute a concept. It has become part of us now; we know how to do it. We have found our comfort zone in doing what we do - but is it the right thing to do? I don't think so. Is it a smart way of doing business? Not really." Overriding the dictates of conventional industry practice is not something Sekhri recommends. Nonetheless, Dining Concepts has done so quite effectively.

"This is what we've grown up doing. It just happened that way. It's really hard to work with so many different brands, concepts, so many different looks and feels. It's a constant challenge. But you

have to keep evolving."

## Key Ingredients

The company's ability to break and bend the rules is built upon a foundation of systems and principles. Applying them to any concept has thus far been a guaranteed success recipe. "We try to be consistent with what we do," Sekhri says. "Consistency and value for money would be two things that set us apart from anyone else."

A problem with quite a few other restaurants is that they forget that they should actually be feeding their customers. A basic idea, but one the restaurateur never glosses over.

"The portion matters a lot," he says. "It needs to be in a size where people feel that they have not been ripped off when they leave the restaurant - that they've had a hearty, full meal and really enjoyed it. Skimpy portions, even if the ingredients are of top-notch quality, they just leave you a little bit hungry. We prefer to have a portion size which is in line with what we charge and with people's expectations."

The near-circumstantial interplay of locations and concepts has led to the company's organic growth and diversity. With brands that charge anywhere between \$80, \$150, \$500 to \$1,000 a head, Sekhri maintains that matching expectations is the key to success. From the food on the table to the aesthetics and style and service, all should be proportionate to the price guests pay, and constantly above par. "They need to leave a restaurant with a sense of fulfillment."

Dining Concepts would not be able to carry out its service promise if not for its dedicated staff continually demonstrating best workmanship and commitment to the industry.

"I think it's all down to team effort, to the fact that everyone puts in their 100% into what they do," says Sekhri. "We have an amazing group of people around us. We are a people's business, and without having the right sort of caliber of people with enough commitment and sincerity, we would not be where we are."

Of these is Director of Operations Sandip Gupta, a consummate food services professional and Dining Concepts' silent chief associate. Hailing from Calcutta, the founding partner oversees the day-to-day work of their entire fleet of establishments, while Sekhri handles strategic planning and financial control. "Our roles are very clearly defined. Between us, we are able to achieve all and manage what we are able to achieve. He can't do it on his own, nor can I," he says.

## Weathering Storms

While the group's internal engineering is near flawless, it remains subject to external factors such as escalating rents and random unforeseen events. The global financial crisis posed some difficulties in 2009, jabbing at the company's bottom line and rendering the business almost flat, with very little growth from the previous year. The 2014 protests have set some establishments back 10-20%, depending on the location. Such times see fewer casual diners and a lot less



Bread  
Street  
Kitchen



Gaucho Steak  
Restaurant



La Locanda  
Italian Cuisine



Mama San

business travelers.

Sekhri acknowledges these realities without however being too concerned. “I guess this is all part of the game. SARS was a much bigger deal,” recounting the harrowing period in Hong Kong’s recent history which took place shortly after the company’s inception. “We lived through it, saw great opportunities coming out of it, and we grabbed those opportunities.

“It’s survival of the fittest,” says Sekhri, whose modest beginnings have not hindered his accomplishments. “I think Hong Kong is the most entrepreneur-friendly city in the world. You work hard, you prove yourself, and you reap the rewards. It’s how you manage yourself, how you conduct yourself.”

While captaining the ship in troubled waters is requisite in any business, it is only possible when supported by a crew of equal passion and grit, characteristics shared by those who work for Dining Concepts.

“The attitude is most important. Sandip and I discuss it very often - it is good to be bright and smart and skillful, but what is more important for us is an attitude. You can mould a person and make them fit into your style of working and way of thinking, but if they don’t have the right attitude, you wouldn’t be able to do that,” says Sekhri. “Everyone comes with an open attitude, they want to learn, they want to adapt, to be versatile - all those things matter a lot in my business.

You can’t be stuck up. You’ve got to think outside the box.”

### Clear Vision for Growth

Sandeep Sekhri is not one to take tomorrow for granted. Dining Concepts plans to move into the casual dining segment, as well as expand into Mainland China sometime in 2015. Already scheduled around the second half of the year is the opening of Le Pain Quotidien in Hong Kong. The Belgian bakery-cafe began in 1990 and now operates over 220 branches around the world. What seems unlikely is any clear end point.

“You know, we don’t need to open more restaurants,” Sekhri curiously comments. “We have enough. We only open restaurants if we get a good deal on the location, rental, lease term, concept...all need to come together.”

It has all come together for Dining Concepts, for several years, consecutively. Sekhri has expressed having no interest in retirement, only at relaxing their pace. Creating spectacular dining experiences, as it seems, is in their blood. “You got to keep doing something,” he says, “and this is the only thing we know how to do.”

To say that the company has gone a long way is an understatement. Theirs is a story of outliers, of providence and destiny, of service excellence, and of true calling - a best-case scenario of staying faithful to what is endemic, doing great things and perhaps, making a profit. ■



Toro Steak  
House &  
Gastro Bar

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