



DINING CONCEPTS

The Merchant *of* Happiness

- Sandeep Sekhri -

'Attitude of Gratitude' Powers Restaurant Czar's Rise



Sandip Gupta (L), Executive Director with Sandeep Sekhri, Founder of Dining Concepts.

Hong Kong's most consumer-driven, trend-setting restaurant chain is writing a new chapter in the history of Asia's most discerning market. Its entrepreneurial founder SANDEEP SEKHRI reveals how and why.

Entrepreneur Sandeep Sekhri is a realist. Amidst the kaleidoscopic world of joviality, facts take precedence. That's not to say the romance of service is lost. He believes that service is its own reward and referral business is built on exceeding expectations. Alas, bills have to be paid and that's when astute strategy is as always – the need of the hour.

Dining Concepts listed on the Hong Kong Growth Enterprises Market (GEM) last year to much acclaim rivaled only by rising expectations of the restaurant taipan. While the industry itself was divided between fan and critics, for the dining aficionado all that matters is – what's new and where.

Though for Food

"We've always been market-driven and our strength has been in our resilience, ability to understand our market and adapt to change," says Sekhri. "Six months after we opened doors, Hong Kong was hit by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the food service industry was hit right in the gut.

The World Health Organisation predicted SARS would be back toward the end of 2003 so the industry was not at its optimistic best. We weathered the storm and then in 2008 suffering the full impact of the US economic crisis we spent nearly US\$2 million to open BLT Steak. We took these chances because we believed in our ability to gauge trends, provide an enjoyable service and outride the storm. Put quite simply, this business is about staying focused on feeding the market's appetite. Yes, there will be distractions but a pragmatic approach coupled with agility, will win the day," says Sekhri.

He adds: "You also have to believe in the long term prospects of this business. You also have to believe in the character of the market you serve. Hong Kong's resilience is unmatched. The very essence of the people here thrives on overcoming adversity. In Hong Kong, people love rewarding themselves for the hard work they put in and what better than good food, drink and ambiance to do it with."

Dining Concepts will open one more restaurant with Gordon Ramsay this year. It has already offered a few well-accepted bars recently and that step too goes against the grain if you look at industry

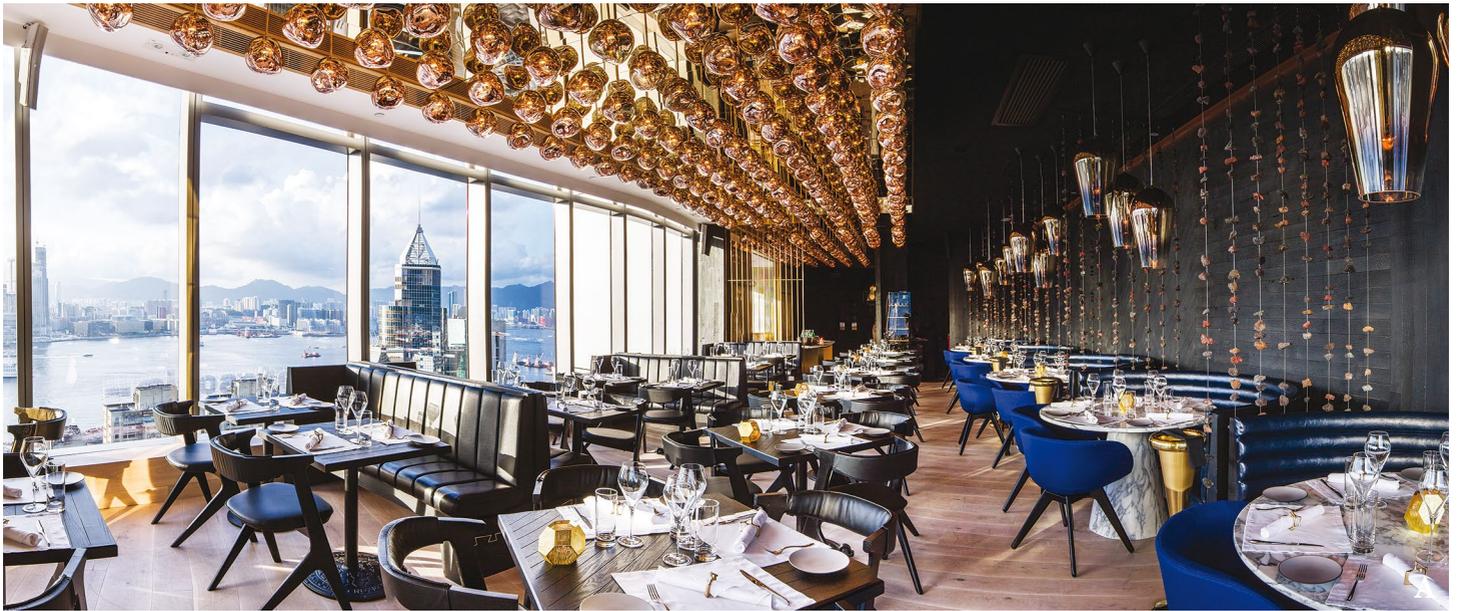
patterns. Most start with bars and then they muster the courage to get into restaurants. "We've gone the other way round. Must be mid-life crisis," jokes Sekhri.

Changing the Game

The prospects of the industry however are entwined with a host of factors including the prices of real estate, location and price points, says Sekhri adding that getting all these factors right is not as easy. "You have to take calculated risks and expand because your credibility depends on it. If you don't you become irrelevant. Landlords are more willing to support a brand that's constantly mobile."

Just how do you maintain a decent level of profitability given the hefty price tags that celebrity chefs come with. Dining Concepts had teamed up with quite a few such culinary luminaries over recent years.

"If we find opportunities where the numbers even out, of course we are open to celebrity chef restaurants. On the other hand, we are looking at innovation at self branded restaurants at which we can provide patrons with that 'wow' factor that they so love and yearn for."



A: ALTO
 B: ALTO's Tenderloin 8oz
 C-D: J.Boroski
 E-F: Le Pain Quotidien
 in Wan Chai and their
 signature Avocado toast
 with spicy shrimps



B

Back to the Future

“Self-reliance can achieve awesome results if you cultivate a self-driven team,” Sekhri says. Given the transient nature of the local workforce, just how is that achieved? “It’s a combination of treating your staff the way you’d like them to treat your patrons; and empowering them to take decisions. We don’t influence our chefs, and our managers have discretionary powers. It’s easy when you infuse your team with a sense of ownership. You also need to have a mission that people innately identify with. Your brand has to be more than just about food. It has to be about bringing value, adding colour. When people pick a Dining Concepts restaurant they should know they are in for a treat, in terms of not just food but the whole experience. In a sense we are not selling food and beverage but satisfaction and happiness. It’s about touching people’s lives.”

View to a Skill

Sekhri’s Dining Concepts dream has evolved to please patrons in no small measure thanks to his wingman – the able and willing Executive Director Sandip Gupta at the helm of affairs since the company’s earliest days. He brings to the table a remarkable flair for people management, an eye for detail and an astounding ‘will do’ attitude. Widely admired by rank and file staff, he supervises the performance of all the Group’s restaurants with consummate artistry and with his executive team of loyal managers, daily operations proceed with relative calm.

“We don’t let our own whims take precedence of what’s commercially via-



C



D



E



F



G: Iron Fairies
H-I: Spiga's
Sicilian red prawn,
half fried with
tamarind sauce
J-K: BIZOU's
Almond Apple
Cake with Carda-
mon Ice Cream
L: Ophelia



ble. Everything is customer focused and driven, that's what helps guide us to pick the right locations, concepts and the right price points," Gupta says.

"Our restaurants have grown popular largely because of satisfied patrons, something you see openly on sites like Tripadvisor and Open Rice. The market continues to shower applause on our concepts and our latest offerings like our Belgian café chain Le Pain Quotidien have captured the hearts of Hong Kong's more discerning patrons. As Sekhri said, we don't just serve food. We provide an experience that is constantly crafted by our customers. We invite suggestions with the whole idea being to offer unbeatable value in terms of freshness, authenticity, presentation, attitude, friendliness, warmth, décor and design. Dining must be an enjoyable, memorable event."

Cultivating Loyalty

"You've got to appreciate that people work hard for their money and they have a right to be discerning as to how and where they spend it. The trick is to make each patron want to come back again," says Gupta.

"In a word – gratitude," he says, with more sense than spirituality in his tone. "One of the biggest mistakes you can make in this business is to take your customer for granted. It is the quickest path to oblivion. If you are well and truly grateful for your patron's business, your gratitude will glow across all aspects of your offering. It will permeate all levels of your including your suppliers, staff, partners and that power will ultimate-

ly show at our point of sales, which in our business is that precise moment the patron steps into our restaurant."

"Gratitude is hardest to fake. The knowledge that management is grateful brings out the best in our staff, which in turn makes them put their heart and soul into the service they offer to our patrons who are quick to spot that sincerity of product and devotion to 'their' satisfaction. If Dining Concepts has a success secret, this is it. We express our gratitude through our service. It has to be expressed because not expressing gratitude is like unwrapping a gift and not giving it," adds Sekhri, betraying a hint of spirituality.

Together, with their team, they continue to serve with one purpose – to bring the world's best cuisine to Hong Kong's diners. "We struggle to keep prices at the

affordability level because though our restaurants are upmarket, we want everyone to enjoy our offerings."

Gupta adds: "We are part of Hong Kong's life and style and we bring the two together in providing Hong Kong with lifestyle choices. In the days to come, we will focus more on consolidation than on expansion and on creating that ever-fresh 'wow' factor that comes from constantly re-thinking, innovating and improving."

On a last(ing) note, Sekhri says, "serving great food is good as service providers, we do our best to remember that a restaurant is a fantasy – a kind of living fantasy in which diners are the most important members of the cast." ■

For additional information please visit www.diningconcepts.com

