

The Two P's to Success -

PASSION & PERSISTENCE

By Avantika Bose

Introducing **Vikrant Batra** — the man behind 'Nueva' and the wildly successful chain 'Café Delhi Heights' — who believes hard work and persistence are the key to success in life. FNL digs in for a tête-à-tête!

A life altering moment often acts as a catalyst for deciding a career path. This moment arrived in restaurateur Vikrant Batra's life when he realised he wasn't quite satisfied only just immersing in his family business (banqueting business) as he was unable to grow it further. On the one hand, he was happy to have inherited this business but on the other, the fact that he was unable to take independent decisions and working in the shadow of his parents made him realise that he needed an out. That's when he took a leap of faith and dived into outdoor catering business. This gave him a lot of satisfaction and after eight to ten years of catering he realised that this wasn't an organised business. He wanted to be a part of a sector that followed systems and processes. It was in this moment that he decided to move into the world of restaurants by starting his own Café, Café Delhi Heights and then after a few years starting a fine dining restaurant called Nueva.

In an interview with Food and Nightlife, Vikrant Batra, tells us that he joined the F&B industry primarily because he is extremely fond of eating. He shares that his parents started the banquet business when he was 13 or 14 years old and he used to be in the kitchen only for the free chilli chicken and spring rolls.

Join him as he tells us about how it all started out for Café Delhi Heights, his immense love for butter chicken, what it's like to manage a chain of cafés, a fine dining restaurant, and a hotel — all at the same time and much more...

Q. How did the journey for Café Delhi Heights begin? And how has it been so far?

Being born and brought up in Delhi and completely in love with it, I wanted to do something that would very beautifully capture this city's diverse culture and combine it with my love for food. This is how the journey for Delhi Heights began. And so far the journey has been brilliant! God has been very kind and I've got more than what I expected. I love working and my customers are my celebrities — they are the ones who have supported me, and that's why I've been doing so great.

Q. How did you come up with idea of starting your own café instead of a restaurant?

Traveling extensively for the past twenty years or so, one thing I realised was that for people in India a café simply meant a place that serves coffee, like a Café Coffee Day or Barista for instance. And on the other hand, growing up the restaurants that my parents took me to were very stiff. There was nothing casual about them. These two factors made me realise that there was a need for a place that was more casual, where you could have a meeting, dine, enjoy good music and drinks. I wanted to create a place with no rules basically a 'no rules café' — where people could walk in slippers, there was no strict dress code, where you could eat what you wanted to eat and sit the way you wanted to, stand or even dance if that's what you felt like doing. The idea was to give a lot of comfort to people, and so I decided to start a café instead of a restaurant.

Q. What is your strongest memory associated with food?

I simply love butter chicken. For me its butter chicken for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, basically butter chicken all day, every day! The strongest memory associated with food for me is when I had my mom's special butter chicken for breakfast.

Q. Is there a set recipe for being a successful restaurateur. If yes, what?

There's no set recipe to become a successful restaurateur. Discipline, hard work, persistence, and passion for your work — and this applies for anything that you do in life. This is something that everybody knows and there's no rocket science behind it. People who want to work hard and are persistent will be successful whether it's owning a restaurant, magazine or anything under the sun.



Q. A little birdie told us that your goal is to have 20 outlets under your wing in Delhi/NCR and Mumbai. How far has this vision progressed?

We are already at 16 now, and if God is kind then we'll reach our target of opening 20 outlets by the end of this year.

Q. Are there any major differences in eating habits of people in Delhi and Mumbai?

I feel this is the biggest misconception that people have. There's no difference in eating habits between the people of Mumbai and Delhi. Yes, 10 to 15 years back people in Mumbai used to eat out more than people from Delhi but now it's all the same. In all honesty, it is very difficult to compare metro cities. Though I would say that the Gurgaon crowd and Mumbai crowd are very similar, but overall there's no difference.

Q. Back in 2013 you opened Palm Springs, a state-of-the-art boutique hotel in Naraina. How is running a hotel different from running a café?

Given I've dabbled with banqueting and catering and currently I own a chain of cafés and recently I've even opened a fine dining restaurant called Nueva, let's just say that a hotel was missing in my basket. Being in the food industry everything is more or less the same, at least for me. True, a hotel requires more maintenance but all in all it's the same as running a café or a restaurant. You give your customers good energy, ambience, and service, and people will automatically come. So, I don't believe there's any difference in running either one.

Q. Back in the day you started another place called Café Terminus 1 which is no longer operational. However, what set this place apart from the rest is that it was a one of a kind fusion restaurant serving different varieties of food from 17 countries. We are curious to find how you came up with this concept?

We shut down Café Terminus 1 almost a year and a half back. At that time molecular gastronomy was the thing and I wanted to open a place where I could do molecular food from all over the world — give fusion to any cuisine whether Indian, European or American. That was the idea behind this restaurant.

Q. One element which separates any restaurant from others is the impeccable service and the service staff. Who handpicks them for you?

When we started out, for the first two years I handpicked the service staff myself, which was a lot of hard work. Later on this led to a lot of organic recruitment. My team now does this task for me and they've very well understood what sort of culture I want to create. If you set a very good work culture then your fight to handpick good staff is over and good people in the industry automatically come to you.

Q. Who is your greatest source of inspiration?

My mother, who has been in this business for the past 40 years. She's the one who still leads the business for us.

Q. How do you manage so many ventures at the same time?

Discipline, persistence, and system. Apart from that, in the last couple of years we've invested a lot of money on technology which has really helped us. Processes and technology is a big thing now and has been a great help for us to maintain so many ventures this smoothly.

Q. What are you passionate about in life apart from the restaurants you own?

Golf

Q. What's the one thing that you'd want your bouquet of restaurants to be known for?

I want the Café Delhi Heights chain to be known as the best café, and Nueva to be known as the best bar and fine dining restaurant.

Q. The best restaurant you've eaten at?

Koya in London

Q. Which place in your opinion serves the best coffee in the world?

When I went to Melbourne back in 2013 I drank the most brilliant, different, and original coffee being served at these tiny café's there.

“ Butter chicken for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, basically butter chicken- all day, every day! ”

Q. What role does the choice of location play for fine dining places to do well?

When you open a fine dining place you can't leave any stone unturned. From your location, staff, cuisine, to the experience of the customers everything is extremely important. So I believe that location, along with other factors, is a very integral element when you open a fine dining restaurant.

Q. Tell us a little about your new fine dining restaurant — Nueva.

Nueva is an up-market bar-cum-fine-dining restaurant. There's a bar on the ground floor with music. The first floor is where the food is served. Chef Michael Swamy is on the board of directors and the famed cricketer Virat Kohli is one of the partners. It offers Peruvian cuisine, which is currently in vogue in the food world.

Q. There is an old saying, 'if you hate someone ask them to open a restaurant'. Do you agree with it?

It's a difficult industry and requires certain amount of hard work and dedication. In my opinion, if anyone is passionate about anything in life then nothing is difficult. True, owning a restaurant means spending very little time with your family. Although, I completely disagree with the statement that 'if you hate someone ask them to open a restaurant'. Yes, if you hate their family then you could ask them to open a restaurant, hahaha!

Q. Any tips for aspiring and newbie restaurateurs?

I would say they should work outside their comfort zone to gain experience and then think about becoming an entrepreneur, and this applies for not only aspiring restaurateurs but for any business. However, if you're planning to own a



restaurant then you must first work at a restaurant. See the kind of hard work it requires and whether or not you're able to adapt to it. If yes, then it's very simple — just be hard working, honest, and persistent and you are good to go.

Q. Last weekend on earth — which city are you eating in?

Barcelona, Spain

Q. Do you have any pet peeves?

Dishonesty — I can't tolerate it when people lie to me.

Q. What is going to be the next big thing in the food world?

Peruvian cuisine has already become very popular and soon it's going to be the 'it' thing in the food world.

Q. If you had just one wish what would it be?

Happiness for me and the people around me.

Q. Name a restaurant trend in India you're most excited about...

A restaurant trend in India that I'm really excited about is fine dining. There is a dearth of up-market bars and fine dining places in the country.

Q. Do you eat out at your competitor's restaurants? Which one is your favourite?

I eat at different places every week as I believe there is no competition.

Q. What aspect of your business keeps you awake at night?

I am scared of failures. In order to get a good night's sleep I work really hard throughout the day so that success remains.

Q. In what ratio does quality of food and décor of a great restaurant contribute towards a great dining experience?

70 per cent food and 30 per cent decor

Q. Facing the gallows, what would you ask for your last meal?

BUTTER CHICKEN!!!

Q. Do you see your kids following in your footsteps?

We can't force anyone to do anything in life until and unless they're keen about it. For now, I've told my son and daughter to focus on their education, and once they're through with it this is what awaits them. If they want to carry this forward or not is totally up to them. I just want both of them to follow their passion!

Q. What's next for you?

I want to contribute towards society through education. So the next thing for me is to open a culinary institute. Though it's not in the cards right now but it's part of my plan and I'm eagerly looking forward to it. ■