



GREAT TEAMS BUILD GREAT BRANDS

Delhi's dynamic duo, Navneet Kalra and Randeep Bajaj, talk about owning three prime restaurants — Town Hall, Mr. Choy, and Public Affair — keeping their menu new and exciting, and what's next for them.

By Avantika Bose

“To witness, that ‘the way to a man or woman’s heart is through their stomach’ is actually what I love about this industry.”

—Navneet Kalra

Joint owners of three of the most successful restaurants in one of Asia's most expensive market spaces, Navneet Kalra and Randeep Bajaj's foray into the world of restaurants and rapid success is no secret. Navneet Kalra started his career at the age of 19 when he opened his first garments store. Always eager to spread his wings, he dove into optics retailing and eventually ventured into the world of restaurants. Randeep Bajaj, on the other hand, began his journey by joining his family business in the travel industry, a lineage of over five decades. Feeling inadequate by not adding much value to a thriving family-run business, Bajaj took a leap of faith and followed his dream by entering the F&B world. Join the two as they unwrap it all for FNL.

Q. What prompted you to enter the F&B industry in Delhi?

Navneet Kalra: Over the past decade, the world has become more experimental about their travel and food, and hence I felt that Delhi, too, was ready to explore their taste-buds, beyond comfort foods such as Dal Makhni, Shahi Paneer, Butter Chicken, and Chicken Tikkas.

Randeep Bajaj: I felt a deep connect with F&B industry since my college days at Babson, and I really wanted to do something in that space ever since. In Delhi, I felt there was huge gap in good dining options, where good food and experiences came together in a casual yet trendy setting. No denying that there were a few good restaurants in hotels but these were extremely expensive for frequent dining, and a few standalone's which offered a perfect combination of great cuisine and good venue in terms of aesthetics. However, a general lack of restaurants offering good food and aesthetically pleasing spaces made me come up with the idea of Amour.

Q. One thing you love about the industry, and one you hate?

NK: To witness, that ‘the way to a man or woman’s heart is through their stomach’ is actually what I love about this industry. There is nothing to hate about this industry, but yes, it requires a lot of hard work, time and constant monitoring, which can be taxing.

RB: I love the fact that it is such a fast paced industry, things are developing at a rapid pace and that keeps us on our toes at all times, so we can keep evolving our product. At the same time sometimes, very rarely though, I hate the same about the industry—its pace. Everything happens in the present, one doesn't have time to react, and everything must unfold perfectly in the first go. But again, this is where the challenge lies as well!

Q. What's your secret to keeping customers coming back?

NK: Our love and dedication reflects in our food and service, which works as a magnet, I guess.

RB: We never compromise on one thing and that is, quality! Whether it's our manpower, ingredients, the décor or the implementation, we always try and use the best available resources. I believe this is what makes people come back.

Q. A food trend gaining momentum in the capital city?

NK: Sushi, Peruvian and Healthy foods.

RB: Health-centric dining including dietary restrictions due to increased awareness among diners.

Q. One restaurant from your portfolio that's closest to your heart?

NK& RB: Town Hall

Q. What might people be surprised to learn about you?

NK: I am and have always been a teetotaler and a vegetarian.

RB: I tend to read / watch news multiple times a day.

Q. What's the most important lesson in business?

NK: Drop your ego and scale your courtesies.

RB: Perseverance is the key to being successful. Give yourself and your ideas time to show results.

Q. What's your personal motto?

NK: To do good and help as many people on my path, in my own little way.

RB: Always strive for excellence.

Q. What's your favourite food?

NK: Dal and Egg Bhurji.

RB: Japanese. Sushi in particular.

Q. Breakfast for dinner or dinner for breakfast?

NK& RB: Breakfast for dinner.



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Q. Tell us about Town Hall and your partnership Chef Augusto Cabrera.

NK: I wanted Town Hall to be the talk of the town, with an outstanding experience for the guests, and hence came in Augusto with his magical 'sushi' fingers.

RB: It's been a fun journey with Chef Augusto. From being his regular patron, I managed to make him believe in our upcoming project while also believing in his ability to go beyond his comfort zone of being a Japanese chef. We love to travel together, do a lot of R&D for the menu, and plan the restaurant operations while keeping a light and joyous atmosphere between us and our team members.

Q. What has been the biggest surprise since you entered this industry?

NK: Everyone wants to be a restaurateur.

RB: Being in the restaurant industry in India you can literally wake up to anything! Although the one thing that never fails to surprise me is the Government's lack of support for the industry.

Q. What does your restaurant do to keep your menu new and exciting?

NK: Fortnightly food trials and bringing in international chefs who are abreast with world class cuisines.

RB: At all our outlets we revise our menu seasonally keeping in mind availability of ingredients and produce. We also try and learn a lot through our travels and research on various cuisines and possible menu items within them from time to time.

Q. We all know service is key. How do you motivate your staff to keep a constant service ethic?

NK: We try our best to look after their needs, and that reflects in their service.

RB: Training through in-house as well as external teams keeps the team motivated, and at the same time encourages good work ethics. As management we never hesitate in doing any job while at the restaurant, and that's how we try to lead by example. It is important to hire self-motivated people because unless you have a liking for your job, it is next to impossible to be motivated.

Q. There are a lot of restaurants in Delhi. Why should a prospective diner choose yours?

NK: The energy of the place with stupendous food—it makes you forget where you are!

RB: We try and create an international experience through great food, fun cocktails, efficient service, and a good atmosphere at prices that do not burn a hole in the customer's pocket.

Q. Starting a restaurant can be expensive and takes a ton of resources. What advice can you give someone who has the restaurant "dream"?

NK: Don't spend too much on interiors. Invest in your chefs and team. And, believe in them.

RB: Be original! Don't try to emulate someone else's success but rather bring something unique to the table.

Q. What made you come up with the whole Peruvian and Japanese cuisine concept for Public Affair?

NK: Innovation is the mother of success. Peruvian and Japanese cuisine is very popular all over the world. If people want to experiment with newer ingredients abroad, then why not bring those ingredients & cuisines for their taste buds here.

RB: Public Affair offers an eclectic international menu where many dishes have Peruvian (Latin) and Japanese influence. However, it is not limited to the same and offers many other options including Middle Eastern, Indian, Mexican, and other dishes but all in a very contemporary manner to blend flavours, ingredients, and inspirations from varied cuisines. The focus on Peruvian food is based on our personal preference towards the cuisine and, of course, from that fact that nowadays it's a trending cuisine—one that has gained a lot of popularity globally. Again, with Chef Augusto and his multi-cultural background and experience and our extremely talented chef team that has members from four countries, we have been able to serve some great Peruvian dishes to our diners.

Q. Best thing about being in Partnership with Navneet Kalra/Randeep Bajaj?

NK: Randeep is young, focussed, and has the hunger for success. He is becoming serious like me.

RB: I get to learn a lot from Navneet since he has been in the industry far longer than I have and is a much more experienced entrepreneur than I. So naturally, I try to grasp as much as I can during my time with him.

Q. How do you see the food-scene in Delhi growing and/or changing in the next few years? How do you hope to influence this?

NK: Seeing Khan Market today, I feel I have already influenced it in a big way. The food industry will grow manifold but only those continuously evaluating their food and services will be on the top of the game.

RB: There will be a lot more health-oriented dining options as well as cuisine specific restaurants. But, I still foresee a lot of focus on bar and bar food-centric places to continue to grow. We hope to create products that are unique in their offerings and those that raise the bar for ourselves.

Q. What do you think when you hear someone say: "I think owning a restaurant looks like fun."

NK: Ya, right!! Stand on your feet from 1 pm–1 am and then talk to me.

RB: It's fun, but far from only being fun. Come to the other side and experience the reality of it. You will learn how much effort and pain, combined with positive energy goes into serving each guest at the restaurant.

Q. Ideal dinner date: Priyanka Chopra or Deepika Padukone?

NK: Priyanka Chopra.

RB: That's a tough one... But, Deepika Padukone.

Q. What's next in line?

NK: Mumbai, here we come!!

RB: We always keep our eyes and ears open to a great opportunity, and while we are not looking to outpace ourselves, we would always love to work on something that seems interesting yet challenging. Having said that, growing the Town Hall brand remains our primary goal at all times. ■



Image source: www.das.co

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—Randeep Bajaj



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