



PANACHE-F: THE KING OF THE DESI KITCHEN

By Avantika Bose

Join us in a tête-à-tête with Chef Ravi Saxena, who shares with us how a boy who hadn't even ever entered a kitchen to make a cup of tea for himself fell in love with cooking, what is his favourite cuisine to cook, how Dhaba by Claridges happened and much more...



Born and brought up in the second-oldest city in India, Allahabad, Chef Ravi Saxena comes from a family of doctors and engineers. It was him who decided to break the norm, and alongside his BDS (Bachelor of Dental Surgery) examination, he also took the Hotel Management test.

Even after being selected in IHM college he had no clue that he would become a chef. During his six months long industrial training, chef was sure he would go into the food and beverage service line in order to become a restaurant manager one day.

However, fate had something different in store for him. It was only in the last four weeks of his training that he had to work in the kitchen, and it was in this moment that he had found his inner calling to become a chef. He was so keen and interested to learn that he started working way past his duty hours.

Q. What does cooking mean to you?

Cooking for me is passion.

Q. How important do you think formal training is in this profession?

In my opinion, formal training is extremely important as it gives you a total setup of this industry — how the kitchen runs in coordination with other departments, and this is crucial especially for your future role. If you just develop your skills in the kitchen, you don't get an overview of the entire setup. I firmly believe that theoretical knowledge is equally important for future growth.

Q. What is a typical day like for you when you are at work?

My day starts around 10.30 am, and then depending on the requirements I visit at least two outlets in Delhi, if I am here, otherwise 10 days in a month I am travelling to our other restaurants across the country. In the last four years, we've grown from one to nine restaurants. Given I'm hardcore into operations, the basic idea is to keep a check on the quality of food and the deliverables that are coming from the kitchen. In a nutshell, my entire day goes into communication and operations.

Q. Is there a chef you admire the most? Who and why?

There are a lot of chefs who I admire, but honestly I don't have any godfather in this industry. I've always looked up to myself and I take pride in the fact that I'm a self made chef or a self made man.

Q. Which is your favourite cuisine to cook?

Italian cuisine, because prior to Dhaba, I was a hardcore Italian chef. I love to cook and eat Italian cuisine.

Q. What's the weirdest thing you've ever eaten?

There's nothing weird for me as far as food is concerned. That being said, if something is weird then I would definitely not eat it. I would like to believe that these things like kangaroo or snake meat which I have tried, are simply a little off track for the Indian mentality.

Q. How would you describe your 'Style of Cooking'?

If I speak only about the Indian cuisine I cook, my style of cooking can be described as simple and honest without overdoing things, and losing the originality of the dish.

Q. What places or cities in the world have influenced your cooking the most?

Talking of my present *avtaar* of cooking as a chef of Dhaba, obviously there are two or three places that have influenced my cooking including Amritsar and Ludhiana.

Q. How did 'Dhabha by Claridges' happen?

I have been working as the Corporate Chef for the Group of Claridges Hotel for the past 30 years. And in this span of time, both me as well as the ownership saw the success of Dhaba, a small restaurant in Hotel Claridges which always had a waiting line no matter what day of the week it was. So one fine day we decided to take this restaurant in the open market because a lot of people are apprehensive about visiting a Five Star Hotel simply due to the cost, and the white collar attitude and atmosphere. So the basic idea behind Dhaba by Claridges was to take this branch to the public. After the success of the first Dhaba, we decided to open the second branch in Cyber Hub. And from there we never looked back — it has been four years now, and we opened our ninth outlet very recently in Bangalore.

Q. What has been your biggest challenge so far?

Dhaba serves Punjabi food, and in India, the most sort cuisine is Indian. Now talking only about North India, how many Indian restaurants do you know which don't serve *dal makhani* or *butter chicken*? None! So why would someone come and eat that in my place Dhaba, and that also at a premium price given that a small restaurant or a delivery service would give the same thing in half the price! Obviously for two reasons — a) quality and b) consistency. Quality isn't an issue for me as I always ensure that a standardised recipe is being followed and a strong SOP. The biggest challenge is with consistency, simply because the food that is being served at my restaurant is very easily available everywhere.

Being consistent with the quality of food is very important — you can't be good one day, bad the next and average the rest of the days.

**Q. In your opinion, what innovation has recently influenced the restaurant business in a significant way?**

Speaking entirely from Delhi's perspective till a few years back it was more of a hotel culture. It's only been in the past five to seven years that you see this sudden rise in the number of restaurants and everyone wants to become a restaurateur. There's cutthroat competition, people have been spoiled for choices and the tendency to eat outside has gone up. So I wouldn't say innovation, but cutthroat competition has brought everybody to a point where every restaurateur out there is trying to put in their best, which in a way is a very good thing as creativity has gone up. Long story short, the competition along with creativity of chefs have really helped everybody to reach the next level and to do better than what they were doing earlier.

Q. What are your other passions apart from cooking?

I love long drives, spending as much time as possible with my family, and listening to music. However, lately given half of my work is done through my phone, be it emails or the office WhatsApp groups etc, even though I hate my phone, it takes up all my time. So you could say my phone is my current passion.

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

Venice, preferably on a Gondola!

Q. Best piece of advice you would give a home enthusiast?

First things first, imagine your final product in your mind — a small trick I follow whenever I cook. Just imagine what your dish would be like and start working towards it, this way your life would become way easier. This is something I would recommend to everyone. I am not saying that you will get the exact same result but it definitely helps you. And ya, be as creative as possible. Know your methods well and most importantly, choose the right ingredients because ingredients make your dish.

Q. Where do you see yourself in five years?

To be a part of a company as Partner. ■



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