



Going back to one's roots

The scale has been eye-popping – from one restaurant in Abu Dhabi to spreading its wings in 18 countries. But the UAE's homegrown falafel brand is now returning to its roots – offering great tasting fast food – while broadening its menu and target audience to redefine its core proposition. **Rupkatha Bhowmick** traces the on-going transformation

Indeed, it's been an extraordinary journey and it's a great feeling to watch your dreams come true, especially if there are many more in store," says Mohamad Bitar, founder & managing director of Just Falafel, the home-grown brand that recently rebranded to JF Street Food.

"I started Just Falafel with my wife and a family friend. We were fond of Mediterranean street food and wanted to bring that cuisine to this part of the world. And then we dreamed of gradually taking the concept beyond to other regions. That's something unusual for this part of the world, specifically Dubai, where you see a lot of concepts being imported while, here we were, wanting to go the other way and export our home-grown concept to the rest of the world. Today, Just Falafel is well-known in several regions across the globe," he reminisces, while admitting he didn't imagine the growth would be so fast-paced.

Some key lessons learnt

Just Falafel was one of the first UAE F&B brands to go global. "We had no case study to guide us when we took the brand beyond the UAE so it was inevitable we would make mistakes - and we did. But we also learnt some key lessons in the process that helped us emerge stronger," Bitar confesses.

"We realised that going the franchise way is a different ball game altogether. It's easier to own 20 stores and exercise control over them than to manage 20 franchise partners. You need more support structures – infrastructure, legal, quality and training – when dealing with franchisees, especially if your geographical spread is so rapid. It was daunting coordinating with our partners in the US, the UK or Sydney where we didn't have offices, because things are so different from country-to-country. One may offer the right infrastructure, while

others may lag," he expands.

"The food business may appear to be an easy proposition but it isn't. You've got to love what you're doing, believe in it, otherwise you're destined to fail. You need proper systems and procedures in place, proper checks and quality control to ensure consistency in every item and location. Only then can you succeed. For example, a customer may have a great experience at our Dubai Marina outlet and quite the opposite at another outlet. That's because each store has a different set of operators, one in sync with our expectations, the other out of sync. It's a huge challenge," Bitar philosophises.

"Franchising everything, including our own stores, meant we were losing direct touch with our consumers. We realise this today. We need to have our own stores – to directly connect with our customers, use them as a training facility for our staff and, most importantly, as a reference point for our franchise partners. It's been



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MOHAMAD BITAR

a difficult journey, that's for sure, but one that has taught us some very important lessons," he admits.

You've got to listen to your customers

Bitar believes a brand is a promise so it's crucial to listen to customers if you wish to serve them better, surprising them at every turn. "We're far more cautious now. That's why we got Technomix, a specialist F&B research agency, to conduct a survey before we expanded to the US. That survey came up with some surprising findings that informed and enriched our expansion thrust. For example, the numbers told us that six million of the 350 million consumers in the US were vegetarian but the quick service restaurant (QSR) category was shrinking in size despite consumers looking for fast casual dining options. What we also found out was that they were looking for concepts that offered better quality food with good ingredients served in a pleasant dining ambience, and, most importantly, that Mediterranean cuisine is among the fastest growing F&B market segments in the US. That was our starting point. We followed up with a survey of 1,000 of our loyal customers in the UAE. There were more surprises in store, 87.5%

of them turned out to be non-vegetarian, the rest consuming meat occasionally, which meant we were serving vegetarian options to hardcore non-vegetarians," reveals Bitar.

"That was a startling insight. It prompted us to run a pilot offering our customers meat along with vegetarian options. We worked closely with our brand strategist to transform our business outlook. And what a transformation it's been," he adds.

From falafels to wider options

Looking back, Bitar sees the roots of Just Falafel's outlook embedded in the age-old concept of street food the world over, whether it be the Middle East, Lebanon or India. It is food traditionally offered down the generations by the familiar corner store, which functioned as long as the day's stock of food lasted. Once exhausted, customers had to come the following day for the fresh stock. The street food Bitar was looking to popularise was falafels.

"We began by offering falafels in different flavours to suit the taste buds of our wide consumer base. But the survey was an eye opener. It showed our loyal customers were looking for more options. That's why we decided to include

shawarmas – another popular street food variant – on our menu as part of the pilot project," he states.

"We saw an immediate spike in sales. But the real surprise was yet to come. We were apprehensive that adding shawarmas to our menu would cause a dip in our falafel sales as non-vegetarian customers would veer to the new options. That didn't happen. Both items continued selling well, complementing each other. It was a huge learning. People who earlier disdained us for our all-vegetarian menu were now keen to give us a chance," Bitar points out.

Rebranding to reflect the transformation

The positive response to the introduction of shawarmas led him to consider a complete rehaul of the menu and brand. "We had initially called our brand Just Falafel because we wanted to counter the notion that falafel is a poor man's food that contains cheap ingredients. Our falafels were fresh and made with high quality ingredients. But the name did convey the misleading impression that the concept offered only falafels. So we decided to rebrand ourselves as JF Street Food, indicating clearly that we've moved beyond falafels to include wider options on our menu. It will be interesting to see how our consumers react to the new name," ponders Bitar.

The falafels are also being perfected, although the core remains the same. "We haven't changed the logic. We still have Original, Greek, Italian and Arabic falafels on our menu and falafels remain the highest selling item, which is encouraging. What has changed is the wider variety of offerings. Our patrons can now choose their protein – falafel, chicken or meat – in the same wrap that uses fresh natural ingredients free of GMOs, antibiotics, preservatives and colouring. We have also introduced some new items like sweet potato and croquets, which are healthier," Bitar elaborates.

He feels the brand has only touched the tip of the iceberg. JF Street Food now seeks to take complete control over the food it serves. "The goal is to make our food consistent in every JF Street



Food restaurant. To do that we'll use the same equipment in every location and carry out routine audits to ensure a holding time of less than three minutes and strict adherence to cooking time in our operations. It was a huge and difficult decision to convert our concept from all-vegetarian to include non-vegetarian, but success definitely tastes sweeter this time around," Bitar asserts.

Expansion takes a backseat

"We are going back to the basics of why we're in business – to offer amazing food through efficient services, not just to widen our footprint. We've been working hard to improve the quality of our food and services and we're beginning to see results. Our average footfall and the frequency of customer visits have increased manifold, positively impacting the overall economics of our stores. Sales are up 250-to-300% at JF Street Food in Dubai Marina. Some months ago, 90% of our sales were through home deliveries. The ratio is now 60:40, making the outlet a great neighbourhood destination where people come to spend

quality time," Bitar shares.

The goal posts are shifting, the plan no longer being to open 100-to-150 restaurants. "We recently opened our second store in North America but from now on we'd like to consolidate the markets we're already in through improved products and services before moving into new ones. In fact, we've shut down a few of our restaurants. Also, we won't be franchising in the next two years, concentrating on our owned stores as well our existing franchise partners," he elaborates.

Bitar has acted on his new resolve, taking back some of his franchised restaurants and launching the first JF Street Food branch in Dubai Marina where, aside from the flooring and ceiling, everything else is new. "We'll open fewer restaurants but in different formats. There will be bigger size flagships, typically spanning 2,000 sqft, with comfortable seating to accommodate more people. Instead of three restaurants in Al Barsha, we may now decide to have a larger one. We'll also have standalone 18-seater concepts for walk-ins and home deliveries. Then

there will be smaller formats located in food courts, malls, airports, universities and even an unconventional one – a mobile food truck, if we get a licence," he shares.

Of course, the brand will continue to depend on franchisees in certain regions and may also get into joint ventures if it finds the right partner. "We'll continue to expand, but in a rational and careful manner because conditions differ from country-to-country. For example, in the UAE, mall-based locations work better than street-side ones, which is quite the other way round in the US. Again, in Australia, malls shut at 5:00pm so its only lunch. So we'll choose our locations according to the region, the basic criteria being high visibility and high footfall, with our target audience living in the vicinity," Bitar clarifies.

"I now define growth on the basis of a restaurant's year-on-year performance. If it's registering growth in sales, it's doing good business. The number of restaurants doesn't really matter. It's prudent to have better performing restaurants instead of focusing on numbers alone," he concludes. ■