

Making a Trade: No Accounting for Taste



Nalin Mittal is what you might call an expat in the loosest sense of the word, in that although he hails from India, he has spent a significant portion of his life in Malaysia, having largely grown up in the country and lived here intermittently for over 20 years. His family, including his parents, have called Malaysia home for nearly three decades. Now, Nalin lives with his parents, wife, and daughter, embracing the multicultural and diverse environment of Malaysia. We spoke with Nalin about his experience and his journey as a restaurateur.

Nalin operates Muska, a café-bar situated in Verve Shops, Mont Kiara, directly across from Garden International School on Jalan Kiara 5. Muska is quite new, having opened its doors in September 2023, with the aim of introducing flavours to Kuala Lumpur that were previously unavailable. Drawing from his Indian heritage, Nalin has infused the menu with modern interpretations of traditional Indian flavours. Muska serves two primary audiences: those eager to explore new culinary experiences and locals looking for a relaxed venue to unwind with friends or family, often while watching live sports.

Despite a background in accounting, Nalin's passion for food led him to the F&B industry. And it wasn't an especially complex or difficult change to make. He explains, "As I am formally trained and qualified as a chartered accountant, I am often asked what am I doing in F&B? I usually respond quite honestly by saying that I just got bored with accounting!"

But like so many of us, he finds a lot more enjoyment in food. "I am and have always

been a food lover," he laughs. "I love eating it, I love watching the masters preparing it, and I love experiencing the environment in which it is meant to be consumed." This passion motivated Nalin to create a venture where he could innovate and offer unique dining experiences. Given his extensive time in Malaysia, Nalin felt confident about understanding the local market and culture, making it a natural choice for his business endeavour. In this case, he literally chose 'no accounting' for a job centred around 'taste'!

Starting a restaurant in Malaysia presented its challenges, such as with licensing and staffing, as well as sourcing expertise from abroad in light of the specialised cuisine. One significant hurdle Nalin faced was the employment of foreign workers, which involved wading through plenty of regulations and procedures. However, as many other expat business owners can attest, local assistance proved invaluable. Nalin also says that he was pleasantly surprised by the robust ecosystem supporting restaurant operations in Malaysia. Suppliers of consumables and kitchen equipment readily reached out, ensuring he had a solid foundation from day one.

Nalin emphasises that Muska should not be categorised strictly as an 'Indian Restaurant' because it offers a unique blend of Indian and Western flavours in a café-like setting. "Where else would you be able to watch a live tennis match while having a pint of beer and enjoying a beetroot *poori* and *chole* [chickpea curry]?" he remarks.

Nalin explains that the Covid-19

pandemic significantly impacted the F&B industry in Kuala Lumpur, resulting in three major shifts, which all influenced Muska's genesis. Firstly, the pandemic-induced boredom led people to venture out more, benefiting the hospitality sector. Secondly, a noticeable preference emerged for keeping life centred around local neighbourhoods, reducing the need for long commutes for dining or entertainment. This trend fostered the growth of micro-markets, like Mont Kiara, making them more self-sufficient. Thirdly, a shift towards more remote work created a demand for local cafés where people could work while enjoying a comfortable setting.

For those considering starting a restaurant in Malaysia, Nalin advises being prepared for the demanding nature of the industry. He notes that running any business is – at least initially – a 24-hour job, requiring constant attention and effort. However, the rewards, including customer appreciation and words of encouragement, make it worthwhile.

Nalin's shift from chartered accountancy to the F&B industry highlights the importance of following one's passion. Muska has enjoyed early success because of this, along with Nalin's desire to create a unique dining experience that blends cultural influences and modern culinary trends. So what's next? "I would love to convert Muska into a multi-outlet chain," Nalin answers. "There is so much creativity possible and ideas that we are brewing – we would love to bring them to the tables of our guests!" ■

To learn more about Muska, visit its website at muskakl.com.