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Pursuing quality

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PURSuing QUALITY



Zara and Arif Salahuddin of Bismillah Biryani exchange views on growing a family business and prioritising product quality.

Conceptualised in 2003 by Arif Salahuddin, former journalist and retired computer hardware entrepreneur, Bismillah Biryani serves biryani unlike any other in Singapore. For starters: this rendition does not come with curry sauce. It is, in fact, the way biryani was first made in the Mughal Empire — with emphasis on rice and *raita* (yoghurt sauce). In 2016, Bismillah Biryani was awarded a Michelin Bib Gourmand, cementing its culinary status and skyrocketing its growth from two stores to five in just two years.

Zara Salahuddin, Arif's eldest child and second-generation owner of Bismillah Biryani, joined the family business that landmark year. In conversation, she jokes often about her father's trademark quips — “you have to have your ‘pulse on the numbers,’ like my father always says” — but is serious when the discussion turns to being a young woman in the industry.

“When I stand my ground, I seem overly aggressive and when I give in, I'm a pushover. It's difficult to find the perfect middle ground, so every day is a new opportunity to learn. I look up to the way my father handles customers and suppliers and try to emulate that, but it also calls into question whether me being a young woman will ever allow me to have similar relationships as the ones my dad has built.”

Zara, you were reluctant to join the family business, right? Zara (Z): Yes. I remember my parents would count how many people they would have to serve just to make money for the day. It was hard work! I always thought that running your own business felt like so much stress.

I worked for a design studio in Singapore when I graduated and was heavily persuaded to join the business at a pivotal point when my family wanted to expand Bismillah. I didn't know much about my dad growing up because he was always working, but ever since I joined, I've been able to see a different side of him. When we drive to

work in the morning, he tells me about his family or life in Pakistan.

You've spoken publicly about having disagreements with him when you started. Z: Yeah. I think it was because we had different perspectives — I was new so I had a fresh take on everything, but my dad has tried-and-tested methods. I used to tell my mum about my frustration, and her advice was to first hear him out, think about things, and do proper research.

My first project was working with delivery partners to expand our reach. Uber Eats had reached out to us before but my dad kept rejecting them because he didn't have the time and couldn't see the benefits. He felt like people would go out to buy food if they wanted it. I told him, “Convenience is the future. If we don't get on board, we will be left behind.”

My dad always wants to return to the times when we made our own deliveries, and my mum can't let go of the relatively large cut the delivery companies take. But I told them it's just not a cost-effective or sustainable solution to manage it on our own. My dad told me he would only sign up if I handled it.

You currently manage customer feedback. How has that been? Z: In every line of work, there are over-the-top customers who demand the world. I sometimes see my staff disrespectfully questioned, but when I step in, I am often met with “can I speak to your manager?” I assume this is because of my age. It's uncomfortable for me to tell them I am the manager, but I have learned to do it.

I have also learned that people who feel negatively often make the most noise. They go the extra mile to make sure their feedback is heard by posting on different platforms, but if they've had a good experience, there's no reason to get their opinion out there.

We try to respond to feedback about the experience of eating our food — for example, when we first started delivery, we got feedback about the lack of plastic cutlery. We immediately went out to buy the right materials and prepare takeaway cutlery packs!

Honestly, though, most of the feedback we get concerns food, which we don't sway much on. We use customer education to address these issues, like having signs that say our biryani comes with raita and not curry. The level of customer education we need to provide differs with each store. At Dunlop Street we receive a lot of tourists, and at Simei we cater to an older, more Chinese crowd, so we spend more time educating customer about the food at these stores.

My dad also makes it a point during media interviews to talk about where our food comes from and how people eat it there. Not everyone is going to like our food, but we think it's nice for them to know this is the way biryani was originally made.

My dad likes to tell me that we cannot bend to what everyone else is saying because if we always change, there's never going to be a distinctive Bismillah flavour.

How would you describe the customer experience here? Arif (A): Zara will probably disagree with me, but I believe you can't have your cake and eat it too. Anyone doing good meals should focus on making good food. Let's say your mum is making something for you. She's not going to worry about putting on lipstick; her focus will be on the preparation of the meal.

Eating at our restaurant is about that home-cooked food experience — it feels like someone has lovingly prepared it without compromising on quality. Customers come in and get honest-to-goodness food at honest-to-goodness prices.

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Now, if, like us, you're looking at growing from a small restaurant to a food service company with more branches, then automation is absolutely essential. You're not just providing for 10 people every day, but for 10 other restaurants that you have. You cannot have 10 different chefs in 10 different restaurants. You need automation to deliver the same flavour people expect.

I think about quality input defining quality output. We have machines that make sauces, equipment that cuts greens and skins chickens. We have a machine that looks at the density of the meat and ensures each piece is cut to contain less than 15% visible fat so the pieces can cook at the same time. Everything affects flavour, right down to the grade of salt you use.

Is it right to say then that quality control plays a large role in your service too? A: Oh yes, but I would debate the word 'control.' The control system subjugates it to something like a list of 10 things to do.

General Electric has a programme called SixSigma, which is probably the hallmark of all quality pursuits. In this programme, there is this thing called CQI: Constant Quality Improvements. It's the idea of always making something better.

We might not have manuals, but I visit this framework often. What we can improve, we improve. Quality should be an endless pursuit! †