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# How to cook a success story

By Nicholas Lander

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Ratnesh Bagdai (right) w with Mark Hix at the chef's restaurant in Soho, London

## Ratnesh Bagdai

Ratnesh Bagdai is so well-connected within the London restaurant scene that he suggested we meet at Hawksmoor steakhouse in Covent Garden even before I knew it had officially opened.

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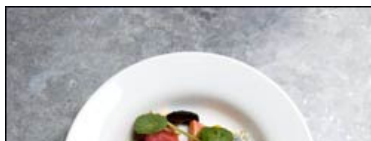
And as Huw Gott, one of Hawksmoor's founders, escorted us to our table, it was Bagdai who asked all the questions. He quizzed Gott about Nick Strangeway, one of the capital's most respected cocktail mixologists, who had been at Hawksmoor but now works for Bagdai. They sympathised with each other over the frustrations of IT issues before turning to the sheer pleasure a new restaurant can generate, even for its rather stressed owners.

Bagdai has certainly had far more experience of restaurant openings than he could have anticipated after graduating as an accountant in 1990. And he has enjoyed many more good meals than he could have expected when he first arrived in London aged four with his family, expelled from Uganda in 1972 like so many other Indians.

During the past three years Bagdai has been the partner behind chef Mark Hix's opening of Hix restaurants in Smithfield, Soho, Selfridge's on Oxford Street and Lyme Regis, Dorset. Simultaneously, he has merged the finance and operations roles for Tapas Brindisa and overseen this company's expansion from its base in London Bridge to Soho and South Kensington.

He also acted as financial godfather to Caravan in Islington, an exciting new opening in London this year. While its four partners had the site, the idea and the business plan, they lacked the bank. According to Chris Ammerman, Caravan's managing partner, "Bagdai solved this with a phone call."

Bagdai also works alongside his wife, Niketa, in supplying accountancy services to a further 21 restaurants. And while his seven years as finance director of the group that managed The Ivy, Le Caprice and J. Sheekey gave him insight into how



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restaurants have to be run, two other experiences taught him the most about how to look after customers.



Ratnesh Bagdai's beetroot with blue cheese, pickled walnuts and pennywort

The first was as a junior manager at the Skyline Sheraton at Heathrow. Finding rooms and food for 200 customers at midnight when their flight had just been cancelled was, he said, the most pressing challenge he has ever faced. The second experience, of opening Rivington Grill, his first partnership with Hix, has not faded either. "It's when you realise that you have to get your own cheque book out to meet the payroll at the end of the week that the reality of owning your own restaurant really hits home," he added, with a somewhat forced smile.

Bagdai is determined to put an end to the old adage that chefs fall into two distinct groups: those that can make money and those that cannot. "Chefs don't have the inclination or the time to deliberate too much, they can only comprehend the week's business they have just finished," he explained. "They need to have a breakdown of the previous week's figures on their desks by Monday afternoon."

And with the figures comes Bagdai's constant exhortation that chefs should concern themselves far less with the selling prices on their menus and far more on their costs. That, he added, is the key to continued success.

As is a passion for food, which Bagdai displayed by polishing off a plate of expertly grilled lamb cutlets with mashed potato and a glass of New Zealand Pinot Noir before agreeing to sticky toffee pudding as dessert.

Bagdai does believe that the tougher economic climate in 2011 will lead to a change in how customers order. "More and more people will go into restaurants with a pre-determined amount of money to spend," he said. "This will significantly benefit those offering sharing dishes, for example. And the chefs that can deliver these at the right price will continue to be extremely busy."

As, I suspect, will Bagdai.

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