



MALAKA SPICE – A BRAND STORY:

An article on Brand and Branding should ideally have a lot of jargon. It must dwell on brand equity, brand value and image. Isn't it? But this article is about a labour of love which became a brand, it is about passion. It is about a dream that came true. Amongst all the research papers with primary and secondary data, analyses and interpretations, here is a story sprinkled with stardust. Not deliberately though but just because the story lends itself beautifully to it.

Praful Chandawarkar and Cheeru studied together at the FCI, Pune. They bonded over travel, food and people. Following their passion, they went overseas. They had successful stints abroad in diverse (and non-hotel management) fields. In spite of high flying and high paying careers, their heart longed to do something together, something about their passion – food. This was their true calling. The birth of their daughter added as a catalyst.

So Praful and Cheeru packed their bags and returned to their favourite city, Pune. On 25th July, 1997, they opened a small but unique restaurant, tucked in a lane in Koregaon Park. It was decidedly different. They had travelled extensively across Southeast Asia and picked the best aspects of each region and tossed them together into a set of carefully developed and **self curated** recipes. So each meal that one has at Malaka Spice is a result of many culinary tours taken in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan and Cambodia. A lot of time was spent exploring the local kitchens in these countries followed by their own innovations, cooking and tasting conducted repeatedly to bring the perfect creative twist on the guest's plate!

Pune was just not used to this taste and texture. It was alien to their palette. Here Praful and Cheeru along with the small team stepped in and helped guests, educating and explaining the concept, thus familiarizing them to the cuisine...one guest at a time. It was a lesson in patience and perseverance. 'Friendly' advice poured in – such as 'service fried rice and Manchurian, Indian-Chinese food like others'. But Malaka 'mom and pop' stuck to their belief, persevered. Slowly and steadily, one step at a time, they built their reputation and a base of loyal guests.

After 2-3 years of struggle and several moments of 'let's close down', Malaka Spice caught on. The losses disappeared....and then there was no looking back. The brand moved from strength to strength. In a few years, the flagship restaurant relocated to its current address in Lane no.5, Koregaon Park. People started thronging the new place too. Then in 2011, Malaka Spice Viman Nagar opened in Phoenix Market City, followed by Malaka Spice, Baner in 2014.

Departments were added, portfolios expanded. Malaka Spice grew. There was Human Care department to take care of the well being of the growing crew members. Learning department started making SOPs and generally putting systems in place. The Marketing department was established.

2016 was an eventful year with Malaka Spice opening restaurants in Nasik (In the beautiful boutique vineyard, Vallonne Vineyard), Goa and Hyderabad. A beer pub, TapRoom opened above Malaka Spice Baner too. The current year saw an ambitious concept – an Indian restaurant with a difference, Tvum serving 'Gracious Indian Cuisine'. Months of research, lost recipes and slow food revolution are some of the highlights of 'Tvum' (located in Kalyaninagar). 2017, also witnessed the launch of 'Fikkanaut', our speakeasy bar in Hyderabad. Also our 2 acre farm was opened to guests as Cherish Farm Stay to experience organic farming and farm to fork concept. Cherish farm is on the banks of river Bhima and is located near Wagholi.

Here is an interesting anecdote as narrated by Praful: "Since we launched Malaka Spice, we have always been on a hunt for locally-grown ingredients that are intrinsic to Southeast Asian cuisine. Take Thai Basil, for example. We had a tough time finding some back in '97-'98. We tried substituting it with Tulsi or Italian Basil but in vain. How we found Thai Basil in India is an amusing story. One day in the late '90s, Cheeru, her father and our cook, Das took an impromptu detour to Shirdi Sai Baba on their way back to Pune from a wedding. Das, a devout man bought a plate of offerings along with a garland. Suddenly, instead of making his way to the temple, Das ran to Cheeru with the garland. The garland was woven with some flowers and Thai Basil leaves! What luck! Who knew we would find seeds of Thai Basil, an essential ingredient used in Malaka Spice cooking in the garden of Shirdi Sai Baba.

Most ingredients used in our cooking - Kaffir Lime, Galangal and Lemongrass have such interesting origins. Now most of these sourced plants and shrubs grow at Cherish Farm or at our friends' farms.

Chefs at Malaka Spice firmly believe that a chef is as good as his ingredients. Hence Malaka Spice group uses most ingredients that are locally grown, following the principles of Slow Food Revolution in all the ingredients right from procurement to cooking!

The Soul Behind Malaka Spice

Each dish prepared here is a living tribute to our Founders' – Praful Chandawarkar and Cheeru Chandawarkar's relentless efforts to innovate in the realm of South-East Asian cuisine. Hidden in the pages of our menu is Chef Cheeru's artistic food experiments, love and gratitude awaiting to come alive on your dining table.

The group pays scrutinising attention to its menus. Malaka Spice has adopted a work cycle that enables them to source local produce and use farm-grown, organic vegetables from its very own 2 acre Cherish Farm. We are completely against canned food and microwaves.

Reinvention as a Brand:

Malaka Spice as a Brand doesn't believe in resting on its laurels. It is constantly reinventing itself. The menu though well loved gets engineered periodically. There are 3 new seasonal/festive menus introduced every year (in addition to the main food menu). This is where the Malaka group gets its adrenaline rush. Research, trials, tasters panel, menu finalization, printing, training, evaluating, launching, feedback – these are some important steps that are intrinsic to any new menu/seasonal menu. It is an enriching journey for the team and the guests. The team gets to see, taste, experience new food, ingredients, combinations and expand to their knowledge. Guests and regular patrons get to expand their culinary horizons by reading about and tasting new dishes. This makes for a better connection with the brand.

Culture Connect:

Which stand alone restaurant, now a restaurant chain can boast of employees who have been with the company since inception? That is the culture of Malaka Spice – to nurture talent. Train and hand hold them so that they can delight guests.

We believe that guests should have the perfect, seamless experience from the time they walk into our restaurants. To ensure that the same is delivered, we follow Whole meal experience (WME). The Whole meal experience (WME) starts when a guest drives into any of the group's restaurant/bar till he/she steps out after a meal. So it covers all guest touch points from the security to the valet, from the hostess to the Host (Captain), stewards, Managers, GRE and back to the valet and security.

After food, the ambience and the art are the crux of Malaka Spice. Art Gallery, showcase, promote local talent. Artists can display and sell their art at no cost for 2 weeks in the beautiful Art Section. Due to this almost all our restaurants are divided into two sections – Art Malaka (the airconditioned inside section with Art displayed) and Classic Malaka (the open air, alfresco seating). We pay attention to small things like fresh plants, trees, lights, outdoor seating and make the experience at Malaka Spice as natural and organic as possible.

As they say 'God is in the detail', Malaka Spice ensures all aspects of the brand communicate the culture. The uniforms, chairs, lights, lanterns are all intrinsic to the brand. The cycle rickshaw and ship are found in every Malaka Spice restaurant. One wall is

dedicated as the 'Story Wall' – Since 1997 and gives a pictorial journey of the brand. Guests love this wall - full of milestones and celebrity pictures. Music is an important aspect of the ambience and brand Malaka Spice. Human Care and Learning team ensure that the crew is happy, engaged and well trained. Initiatives such as 'Crew of the month', Appreciations, Superstar, educating girl child of an employee etc. are a part of the DNA of the Malaka group. There are regular training sessions, departmental trainers, manuals, SOPs which act as enablers in Learning. Tests and assessments help us know the understanding and effectiveness of training. Guest ratings and scores reflect this too.

Every Friday, each restaurant across locations, has a weekly Line up. It is a wonderful forum to meet the entire team across departments, celebrate birthdays, communicate, engage in a fun activity, read reviews, take stock of the week etc. It is attended by the Core Team members and also serves as a help desk for staff issues. It ends with an energetic Malaka Clap. Another ritual that is sacrosanct at Malaka Spice is the 15 minute guided meditation session everyday at 11 am and 6.45 pm. All crew members are expected to soak in this experience and connect with their inner selves.

All these initiatives and processes enhance the brand connect and make Malaka Spice a unique culture with unique crew.

Malaka Spice group believes in giving back to the society in a meaningful way. Through an NGO started by Praful Chandawarkar 'Live Life, Love Life', there is extensive work and donations in the field of cancer. Developing vendors, nurturing young men from remote villages, collaborating with other NGOs for volunteering are some other activities undertaken by the group.

Conclusion

Malaka Spice is a one of its kind restaurant in India. We aim to keep innovating with travel inspired Southeast Asian cuisine, driven by the Farm to Fork principle. We will be developing new leaders to take the unique Malaka Spice concept across the country.

Thus Malaka Spice as a brand has expanded to 3 more cities; Goa, Hyderabad and Nashik and now has 7 restaurants, 2 bars and a Farm Stay across the country.

As Malaka Spice's fountainhead, Praful says "We treat our vendors with care. We keep innovating our dishes, since it is the heart and soul of our business. We value our employees, we scale up, we dream big!!!"

The emotional connect that people feel with the brand is immeasurable and most valuable to us. We have been an integral part of their family and friends outings since 20 years.

This dedication and integrity has given us an edge in this highly competitive business and continues to do so...

By

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