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From Chennai to Chicago

The city's best-known restaurateur M. Mahadevan has his sights now set on the world, says SHONALI MUTHALALY



TAKE ONE hip Spanish Tapas bar crammed with beautiful people waving bright cocktails. Add a Food Court spilling over with travel weary crowds and scalding sambar rice. Throw in an elegant French restaurant. Spice it up with another that is exotically Thai. For colour, add a funky Mexican joint. Garnish with a wheat bread-doughnut chain.

Voila! You have restaurateur M. Mahadevan's career on a tray.

And these ingredients are just part of Mahadevan's rapidly expanding edible empire. Already, his mushrooming bread chain, B&M Hotbreads Ltd. has 48 outlets around the world (with as many as 22 in the UAE and seven in the U.S.) and three more will be opening soon in Boston, Seattle and Chicago.

What's more, Mahadevan has tied up with Saravana Bhavan to create a food chain for Indians abroad craving 'idli-dosa' and foreigners with a passion for sambar. The chain covers Dubai, Singapore, Malaysia and California so far, and is planning to open in Muscat, Paris, New York, Colombo and Toronto next.

At home too, Mahadevan's restaurant chain is growing at a bewildering speed. Planet Yumm, the franchisee-based food court operation, gained the distinction of being the first private sector entity to be awarded a licence by the Southern Railway to run an outlet at Chennai Central. Planet Yumm also has an outlet in Koyambedu opposite the bus terminus and is in the process of setting up a 15,000 sq.ft. outlet in the third phase of Spencer Plaza. Meanwhile, another Planet Yumm will be opening this month at Abirami theatre, which is being renovated into a huge seven-theatre/mall.

How did all this begin? "I started my career as a Marketing and Management professor at the Madras University. After that I began teaching Catering Management at the Taramani catering college. That's where I realised 'food business is good business'," Mahadevan chuckles.

His theory on management turned practical with the striking of a partnership in 1987 to set up Cascade, the Chinese restaurant. However, Hot Breads, which started baking two years later, was actually the big bang in his career, though nobody thought it would work. "Bread was a patient's food then. When I talked about bread, people would look at me sympathetically and say 'Are you not feeling well'," he says.

However, when the first Hot Breads outlet opened its doors in Chennai, customers began piling their trays high with bread, baguettes and doughnuts, giving Mahadevan his first whiff of success.

Some outlets later, he decided to convert the North. "When I opened Hot Breads in Delhi, nobody there could believe a 'Madrasi' was coming to teach them what baguettes were," he says with evident satisfaction at having proved to Delhi that Chennai's not just a city of "quiet idli eaters".



While 'B&M Hot Breads Ltd.' handles this burgeoning chain, Mahadevan's speciality restaurants are under the umbrella of Oriental Pvt. Ltd. The only exception is the French speciality restaurant, le Madeleine, operating under 'Chennai Cuisine', a partnership with chef-entrepreneur J.K. Madan.

"The restaurants support each other. My family leads a fairly simple life so we don't need much," says

Mahadevan. So, Zara pumps money into la Madeleine, and once it gives the city a bon appetit, it will support Mahadevan's latest project - a lounge bar above Zara, with quiet music and an array of wine and cheese. (In Paris, however, his Hotel Kanchi supports a very different kind of dream. Mahadevan uses part of its healthy profits to educate a bright young Chennai chef every year at Ferrandi. Their latest success, the son of a Chennai traffic sub-inspector, is currently working at the Eiffel Tower's only restaurant.)

Mahadevan says his policy of combining authenticity and refinement is what keeps his diners happy. Chef Regi Mathew, who bustles between Benjarong's kitchen and its deliciously colourful interiors ensuring that his tables flower with picturesque food, does intensive research on Thai food for his menus and has travelled to Spain to study 'tapas' for Zara.

Zara's Italian cocktail bar manager Sebastian Galvez Bunge, distinctive with his sleek ponytail and studiously night-clubbish all-black attire, has spent years whipping up mean cocktails in Barcelona - till Mahadevan convinced him to come to Chennai, cocktail shakers and all six months ago. Thanks to his cocktail wizardry, the Zara fever is spreading. The Dublin discotheque in Bangalore just organised a 'Zara Fest' by importing Seban, and Mumbai will have a sprawling Tapas Bar in Worli in a couple of months.

For la Madeleine, Mahadevan went to France to persuade chef Christopher Celibert to come to Chennai. Christopher, who passed out of the fêted Ecole Supérieure de Cuisine Française (Ferrandi), was working at the Inter-Continental Hotel when Mahadevan zeroed in on him. "Christopher was enthusiastic but I sat with his dad and mom for three hours saying, 'I'll take care of your son', before they let him go. It's always a challenge to persuade people to move to India because the foreign media shows India as a mystic world filled with snake charmers and wandering cows.

Mahadevan's management style, underlined by the principle of devolution, makes their growth possible. A good number of the openings are 'remote controlled' thanks to his key staff in each city. As Mahadevan says, "You have to delegate if you have to expand. If you want to sit with your hands on the cash register, then you'll have to be happy with just one shop."

Mahadevan says his ventures succeed because of the staff - both those at the tables and those behind the swinging kitchen doors. "It's like a family," says Mahadevan, peeking at the Zara bar counter where a group of waiters are cheerfully slapping each other on the back. "We go into organisations and source people, then they bring in their friends and relatives. We've never had to advertise and our boys travel the world on this job, moving from restaurant to restaurant. Today, we have 3,000 people working for us. To me, that's our biggest achievement."

Edible empire

Hot Breads: The chain that proved just-baked bread sells like hot cakes, and hot cakes sell like... well..

hot cakes

Wangs Kitchen: Popular but unremarkable, Wangs was a hotspot in the early days and has possibly seen better times.

Copper Chimney: Feel like a nawab without having to clamber on an elephant and set out on a royal hunt to find dinner.

China Town: Wafting fumes of soya and close-set tables...has had a recent makeover but is still just another Indo-Chinese restaurant.

Don Pepe: Introduced Chennai to burritos, tortillas and such like. So Mexican that even the waiters look like they've emerged from a siesta.

Cafe Picasso: Is it Italian, is it Mexican, is it Chinese, is it Indian...or just an American Born Confused Desi?

Planet Yumm: Enthusiastically crowded. Head here if you like eating noodles with dollops of vanilla ice cream... nobody'll bat an eyelid.

Benjarong: The perfect place to enjoy 'the lingering taste of Thailand'. Fortunately, the bill hasn't got a ravenous appetite too.

Zara: Spanish Tapas Bar turned snooty. Dress up if you want to drown your sorrows here... and watch the cocktails or you'll do the salsa all the way home.

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