

He woke up and smelt the Mocha



Mr Riyaaz Amlani, CEO and Managing Director, Impresario Entertainment & Hospitality. - R. Ragu

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A shoe salesman who brought to the table his unique business sense to emerge a hugely successful restaurateur

Salt Water Café, a popular eatery tucked away in the by-lanes of Mumbai's Bandra Reclamation, is one of those few places where you need a reservation for breakfast on a Saturday morning. The café, with its clean lines, mint-laced water jugs and rustling newspapers, is quintessential Bandra. And if you fancy something grander, lunch is just a sea-link ride away at The Tasting Room in Lower Parel. Here you can nibble on watermelon and feta cheese, with crystal chandeliers and gilded mirrors for company. For after-lunch

coffee and gossip, you can head to Mocha, in Churchgate, which is redolent of a deliciously decadent royal durbar. You can round off the day with some theatre and *chai* at the Prithvi Café in Juhu. These establishments are among Mumbai's prized hotspots, attracting the city's who's who... but not many know that these places are just among the many owned and run by a one-time shoe salesman called Riyaz Amlani.

“I learnt long ago that Mumbai is not one city,” says Amlani, as he talks about his first trial-by-fire. From the age of 16 he worked at Metro Shoes until the entrepreneurial bug bit him and he started a small shoe store in Sion with a little financial assistance from his grandmother. “It is an ATM today — that gives you a sense of how big it was,” he smiles wryly. “Looking back now, it's like a bad memory. The dream was to support myself. I was studying in college and selling shoes. I wanted to bring the Colaba experience to Sion. I had an air-conditioned store and a really good window-display. There were four other shops next to mine and they were doing much better than me, though I could not understand why. I had a better selection of shoes, I was cheaper and I had air-conditioning. I eventually realised that people were intimidated by my store. Opening the door meant commitment. The other stores did not have glass doors, so they did not have that problem. It was solved a few months later when I couldn't pay my bills and off went the AC and the glass door, and business tripled. So that's something that is etched in my mind. Perception is more important than reality.”

With that ethos underlining everything he did, Amlani soon grew out of the pigeon-hole shoe store to emerge as one of the country's leading restaurateurs. Today, his company Impresario runs more than 27 establishments across eight cities including Mumbai, Delhi, and Pune. His brands include Mocha, Smoke House Grill, Stone Water Grill, and the Le Kebabiere in Pune.

THE MOOD MAKER

Walking into his chocolate-coloured office marked by high ceilings, distressed walls and leather lounges — not much unlike a gentlemen's club — I am tempted to call for a martini, rather than a coffee. That's a testament to Amlani's mantra of creating the right mood, as evident across his restaurants. He is even known to control the lighting to make sure his customers look good!

Amlani was always driven to create new experiences. Realising that the shoe business was not for him, he went to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) for two years to study entertainment management, and became a

consultant on return. “My first client was Hiranandani [real estate developer]. We developed a go-karting track for him, which is still there. Our attractions got a lot of Bombay folks to check out the place and, as a result, he was able to sell a lot of space.” He later joined Prithvi Nandy Communications after Nandy, taken in by Amlani's enthusiasm for the studio system of dishing out movies, offered him a job. “I was very ambitious, young and stupid. I was excited about doing something new all the time. We were the first to sell film stars for hoarding space, in film placement promotion.” But the sheen of Bollywood quickly dulled for him.

CRYING NEED FOR HANGOUTS

On a particularly bad day at work, he called his best friend, Kiran Salaskar. “The two of us had always thought of setting up a coffee shop. When I was dating this girl back in my shoe days, I used to get very little time, mostly in the afternoon, when business was slow. I had nowhere to go. My choices were limited to a movie or a five-star coffee shop.” There was no Cafe Coffee Day or Barista at the time, and Amlani did not want to start yet another Italian-inspired American chain. “In India, people don't need espresso shots or takeaway coffee. They are looking for a nice space where they can park themselves for the price of a cup of coffee.”

He and Salaskar found their inspiration in the Kahwah Khanas, the original coffee-houses of Morocco. “These places were the social fabric of these cultures,” he adds, “and we wanted to create a contemporary Kahwah Khana in Bombay, rather than going the Italian resto-bar route. People wanted to hang out and we gave them an all-day café.”

By pooling their savings and convincing a third friend to invest, they acquired 500 sq ft in Churchgate, and brand Mocha was born. Amlani's UCLA experience came in handy, too, as he had worked part-time in restaurants there to pay his second semester tuition fee. “I had flipped burgers, was the host, guy on the phone, waiter, all-round bus boy, and slowly learnt the business.”

What he and his friends lacked in knowledge they made up for with enthusiasm and creativity.

They raided their own houses for furniture, refurbished old linen and introduced Mumbai to the *sheesha* (hookah), an essential ingredient of the Kahwah Khana. The experience was unique and the response, overwhelming. However, it also raised concerns over the spread of tobacco use. “It became a subculture. I never wanted to promote it. It was only meant to be a side

attraction," says Amlani. Impresario is now in the process of developing a no-smoke, no-tobacco *sheesha* to address the issue.

LIFE ON A ROLLER-COASTER

Describing the dizzying success of Mocha, Amlani says, "It became this roller-coaster ride I could not jump out of and, before I knew it, we were expanding the premises and starting one in Bandra." The Mocha team soon realised they needed external funding, but that their format was not likely to attract lenders or PE players. So they opted for the franchisee route; within a few months they set up an office in Byculla and rolled out franchises in Juhu and Delhi. Around 2008, Impresario got its first round of funding from Beacon Capital. Says Amlani, "That helped us get more professional and I thought I would grow old extolling the virtues of coffee." That is, until he accidentally came upon a small piece of land on Chowpatty beach that was then used as a municipal dump; he decided to convince the collector to lease it out. "I wanted to create a space that was a mini-vacation for my customers." Soon, Salt Water Grill became the place to watch the Chowpatty sunset at, accompanied by fine-dining.

While Amlani admits he finds it hard to be involved in the day-to-day running of so many restaurants, he is nevertheless in the driving seat from conception to launch. "I am completely involved with the décor and the feel. Salt Water Cafe had no ocean, but we wanted to keep the sandy vibe alive. We made it straight-lined and modern with beige everywhere, from brown paper bags to menus. All the grills in Smoke House Grill, in Delhi, are hand-painted, and so are the doors. My role is to create the concept."

Of course, he does not discount the value of good food.

Every year he travels with his core team to sample cutting-edge cuisine all over the world. "My hero is Ferran Adrià. Chefs like him are always looking to push the envelop. They reconstruct food and are not burdened by tradition. What is joyful for me is to give a chef a theatre to show his culinary skills. I want to take the customer on a culinary journey using his senses."

Amlani points out that while the restaurant business is glamorous, it requires 16-hour days and non-stop travel. "I enjoy my life, but I want to retire in four years' time and take a sabbatical. Then open a few destination hotels — places off the beaten path, which focus on preserving ecology and creating bonds between families. People are becoming too removed from where their food comes from."

EMBRACING SUCCESS, AND HOW!

In a business plagued by attrition, Amlani invests great confidence in his team as he believes that it's all about giving ownership and accountability.

“My second layer is great. They have been with us from the beginning and are like family. The people who feel passionately will always stay on. It's their baby as much as it's mine, sometimes even more.”

Amlani believes his biggest strength is his ability to find something special in every opportunity. “My mother encouraged me to think for myself. She forced no dogmas on me. She would always say, ‘hang out with those people but teach them something good’. I grew up in an environment of positivity,” he smiles, “and that makes me want to throw my arms around everything and give it a big hug.”