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Keeping customers happy

By GERALDINE LING

WHEN life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

That was what Nabin Naral, the current owner of Arabian restaurant Nabins, did five years ago when eight chefs left a restaurant he had previously managed.

They had been asked to leave because of disciplinary problems, he says.

Faced with a shortage of chefs, Nabin, 29, promptly rolled up his sleeves and started cooking — despite being an amateur in the kitchen. At that time, he knew how to prepare only simple dishes like fried noodles.

"It was one of the biggest challenges of my life," he says. "I had to learn everything from scratch, but within one month, I knew how to make every dish on the menu."

To master the recipes, Nabin spent most of his days — and nights — at the stove. He taught himself how to cook through recipe books and online cooking sites.

"I survived on only two to three hours of sleep per day. In the end, I went from not knowing how to chop vegetables to being able to chop them without looking," he says.

As he honed his culinary skills, Nabin started modifying the restaurant's recipes for a better taste. "I came up with better recipes and people liked them," he says.

A dish that he is proud of — which is served in Nabins — is the lamb mandi, which is fragrant basmati rice and charcoal-grilled lamb shank with roasted potatoes, green salad and spices.

The skills he picked up then came in useful about three years ago when he established Nabins with a silent partner. The pair invested over \$100,000 (RM250,000) in the venture.

"Even if my chefs leave, I won't be stuck. I can do everything by myself," he says.

The owner of an Arabian restaurant finds interacting with diners the best part of his job.



The delicious food a restaurateur ate in the Middle East made an impact on his life. - Filepic

Going further

These days, however, if he is not on business trips, Nabin spends most of his time taking care of Nabin's day-to-day operations.

It is a whirlwind of activity as he answers some 200 phone calls from customers — Nabin's mobile phone number is prominently featured in his restaurant's business cards. He also splits his time between the restaurant's two outlets at Sultan Gate and Bali Lane, checking on their cleanliness levels and training service staff.

In the evenings, he dedicates his time to interacting with customers.

"Many people find it hard to believe that a boss would walk around the restaurant talking to the customers, but I want to give them my best."

"I'm happy when customers are happy. That's the best part of my job," he says.

Setting up an Arabian restaurant had always been a cherished dream for Nabin, who is from Nepal.

He moved to Singapore about 10

years ago to study for a diploma in hotel and restaurant management in a private school.

After graduation, he worked for four years in another Arabian restaurant here, where he was introduced to Middle Eastern culture and food. He also had opportunities to travel to the Middle East to experience its way of life firsthand.

"I was very happy when I saw the desert and the Bedouin tents. Somehow, they made me feel at peace," he says. He was also

touched by the warm hospitality he experienced and the delicious food he ate.

"I wanted to bring all these back to Singapore. Till today, Arabia has an impact on whatever I do in my life," he says.

Nabin is now in the process of establishing a Nabins outlet in the United States. "I want the Nabins experience to stretch past Singapore. I want it to touch places around the world," he says. — Singapore Straits Times/Asia News Network