

alumnus **Sandeep Sekhri**: Fine-Dining in Hong Kong 2017

The entrepreneur-founder of 26 out let Dining Concepts Ltd including Bombay Dreams on working as a waiter in India, revolutionizing Hong Kong's eating scene, and playing ping-pong



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In 2002, Andrew Lloyd Webber launched *Bombay Dreams*, a Bollywood-inspired musical, in London. The show, which became wildly popular, told the story of an ordinary young man who overcame a series of obstacles to become the next big thing in the Hindi film world.

The same year, a young man from India opened his first restaurant in his **adopted city of Hong Kong**.

Like the protagonist in the musical, he too had gone through loss and failure. Inspired by the musical, entrepreneur Sandeep Sekhri named his restaurant Bombay Dreams.

Fifty-year-old Sekhri's life story could be straight out of a Hindi film. A simple boy, with little to his name except ambition, determination and an unremitting capacity for hard work, goes overseas in search of a brighter future. He encounters all sorts of setbacks, comes close to giving up, and eventually makes his fortune.

Sekhri's formula for success is simple—let the heart rule the head. “For me, it's always decision first, strategy later.”

We meet at *Le Pain Quotidien*, a Belgian café that Sekhri's **company, Dining Concepts**, has brought to Hong Kong. It's located in Pacific Place, one of the swankiest retail destinations.

Sekhri is the founder and chief executive officer of the company that now **operates 26 high-quality restaurants and bars across Hong Kong**. The outlets cover a range of cuisines—Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Greek, Italian, French, American, Brazilian, a Belgian café and bakery, several steakhouses and a couple of bars.

Raised in New Delhi, Sekhri left India in October 1990 to work as a manager at an Indian restaurant in Hong Kong, The Viceroy of India. He was 24, had been married for all of two weeks, and had had stints with Le Meridien and the Taj Mahal Hotel. It was the first time he had stepped out of the country, he says, adding, “It was my first time on a plane.”

He wasn’t particularly sad about leaving India. “I had nothing going on for myself in India and I promised myself I would never go back,” he says.

Sekhri was a typical teenage boy in a close-knit, middle-class Punjabi household. His father worked for the ministry of railways and his mother was a homemaker. The youngest of three children, Sekhri says he was an average student in school—**Central School in Delhi’s RK Puram** area. Unlike many other boys of his generation, he had no interest in becoming an engineer or a doctor.

Sekhri decided to explore a career that made use of his relationship skills. “I have always been comfortable around people,” he says. “I have the art of persuasiveness, I can get things done.” In 1983, he enrolled at the Institute of Hotel Management, Catering and Nutrition at Pusa in Delhi. Simultaneously, he did a **bachelor’s in commerce from Delhi University**. After finishing class, he would head to the **Taj Mahal Hotel or Maurya Sheraton and work there from 7pm till the early hours as a waiter in the banqueting department**. At the end of the night, he would earn Rs50.

“Fifty rupees was a lot of money back then,” he says, adding, “It is this experience that made me who I am now.”

Sekhri completed his hotel management course but remained disillusioned with the economic opportunities available. Salaries were small. He felt he had chosen the wrong profession because “your income is never commensurate with the effort you put in. You earn so little even after working 16 hours a day.”

So when a **job opportunity in Hong Kong** came up, he jumped at it. First, he looked it up on a map. “It was the pre-Internet days,” he reminds me. “I had no clue where Hong Kong was.”

...What he had, though, was strong self-belief, the capacity to work very hard, and loyal friends. Eight people who worked with him at The Viceroy and Gaylord left with him when he quit—with no salary, no job, just plenty of faith in Sekhri. One of the eight, who still works with him, is Sandip Gupta, now executive director of Dining Concepts. “It wasn’t a prudent decision but I trusted Sandeep,” says Gupta. “You learn from your past. I had worked with him for six years and those six years were enough to convince me that I could trust Sandeep.”

Sandeep and Sandip joined forces, deciding to open a restaurant...

In December 2002, *Bombay Dreams* opened its doors. In March 2003, he opened a second Bombay Dreams in Kowloon.

Sekhri was back on his feet, but not for long. At the end of March 2003, SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) hit Hong Kong. It caused unprecedented economic and commercial damage. Nervous customers stayed away from stores, and diners remained at home. Sekhri says he lost 80% of his business overnight.

It was a massive blow—financially and emotionally. Sekhri has a vivid memory of walking to an ATM one day to withdraw HK\$1,000. A message flashed—he had insufficient funds.

“It hit me really hard. It was like my world had collapsed around me. I asked myself—how did I reach this point? I wondered if I had made a huge blunder in giving up a stable job and income. All I had to do was suck up to my boss.”

Sekhri did what he always does when he finds himself up against a wall—work even harder. Many restaurants had closed down. The entrepreneur in Sekhri saw this as a business opportunity. Bombay Dreams stayed afloat. And by the time SARS abated a few months later, Sekhri had opened another restaurant—Soho Spice.

The next few years would establish Dining Concepts as a solid restaurant brand. Today the company has an annual turnover of HK\$500 million (around Rs417 crore) and more than 800 employees. Dining Concepts has brought in restaurants backed by global celebrity chefs, including Laurent Tourondel's BLT Burger, Gordon Ramsay's London House, Michael White's Al Molo and Enrico Bartolini's Spiga.

Visits to India are now strictly to see family—**he visits his mother every six weeks. He speaks adoringly of his wife Rosie, 48, who has stood by him and taught him some important lessons along the way** (including how to play ping-pong—she was a national-level gymnast in school and played table tennis at the state level for Punjab).

For Sekhri, it isn't just a way to kill time. He plays for over 90 minutes every weekend with a friend—not his wife, “because we become very intense and are ready to kill each other”. Sekhri insists he's pretty good at the game now. Like everything else in his life, it didn't come easy.