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Zahid Kasim

Founder of Café Lazeez

When Zahid Kasim decided to leave his job at the bank where he had worked for 16 years, he planned to use the money from his severance package to open a restaurant. Unfortunately, the bank he worked for was BCCI and 10 days before he was due to leave, it collapsed. That was the end of Kasim's severance package and all his savings.

Ironically, it was while at BCCI that Kasim had had the idea of opening a restaurant in the first place. As the bank's head of human resources he often had to take people out for lunch, and he soon realised that there were very few high-class Indian restaurants to choose from. Having been born and brought up in Pakistan before his family moved to Britain when he was 10, he felt the absence acutely and thought that there might be room for a new kind of Indian restaurant in the UK.

He says: 'I would get pangs for the kind of food I grew up on, but Indian restaurants here were still in the primary stage of evolution. They were still very much first generation. Having Ravi Shankar music playing constantly in the



background really didn't do much for me. I didn't feel it was very relevant. There was this vacuum in the market.'

At the age of 37 with a lifetime spent in the corporate banking world and no money, Kasim was not an obvious candidate to be an entrepreneur. But after the collapse of BCCI, he decided that if he were going to put his plan into action it would have to be now or never. He was offered other jobs in banking, but says: 'I had had enough of banking by that stage and wanted to change direction. I just lost my spirit for the whole thing.'

With no savings to support him, however, he soon realised that he needed to enlist the help of his family. And if he was to have any chance of success he needed to get his sister Sabiha, who was a brilliant cook, on board. But Sabiha was busy bringing up three children and already did a lot of corporate entertaining for her husband's colleagues. She did not want to get involved.

In the end it took Kasim nearly two years to persuade her to join him. He says: 'I needed somebody with expertise at a

core level, and without her I don't think I would have started this. Eventually she agreed to give me six months to get the foundations sorted, but of course she ended up staying much longer.'

Sabiha's involvement also gave Kasim's family the confidence to provide him with start-up capital of £100,000 in return for equity in the company. As the business grew they took a further stake for £200,000. Kasim admits: 'Persuading them was not that easy but when I got Sabiha on my side we handled it jointly. They knew that Sabiha was a skilled cook and knew about quality control.'

Kasim opened his first Café Lazeez restaurant in 1992 in South Kensington, London. It was not the best of times as Britain was in the middle of a recession. Kasim was determined to make it different from other Indian restaurants, so he hired a designer to give it a minimalist look and deliberately gave no external clues as to the type of food it offered. He even banned the ubiquitous sign hanging in the window of most Indian restaurants at the time, which declared: 'Fully air-conditioned'.

Unfortunately, his ambitious vision initially backfired. He says: 'In the early days people would come in expecting an Italian or French restaurant. They would take one look at the menu and walk straight out. That went on for about six months and it was scary.'

The turning point came when Café Lazeez started attracting the attention of the food critics. One of the first reviews heralded the restaurant as 'the shape of things to come' and soon it was winning awards for its cooking. Kasim says: 'Every week something was written about us saying we were trying to change the whole Indian cuisine context. It was very positive.'

Kasim opened three more Café Lazeez restaurants in London and Birmingham and in 2004 the business had a turnover of £4 million.

Right from the start he knew he wanted to create a Café Lazeez brand that could be used in other areas, so in 2001 Kasim opened a fast-food operation called Lazeez Express to provide food at sporting events. He also hoped one day to create a range of food that would be sold in supermarkets.

He says: 'People felt I was crazy because they thought that the brand values created at a high-quality restaurant could not be transposed in this way. But I didn't understand why they couldn't.'

He had no regrets about leaving banking, saying he was never driven by money but instead was really motivated by the thrill of creating something new. 'Money hasn't been a great motivator in my life,' he says. 'For me the most exciting part is creating something that has value. If I can achieve that, then hopefully I will be a happy person. If I can leave something for posterity, that would be fantastic.'

Fact File

Date of birth: 1 January 1954

Marital status: divorced with one child

Highest level of education achieved: university (did not complete course)

Qualifications: three A levels

Interests: listening to music, current affairs

Personal philosophy: 'Inspire to aspire.'

In a nice twist Kasim, 55, also embarked on setting up an overseas franchise operation for his restaurants – in Pakistan and India. In 2007 the business was taken over by another company and Kasim left to pursue other ventures.