

Back to His Roots

Restaurant executive Robin Chakrabarti returns to the industry that gave him his start

By Roma Ihnatowycz

Professionally speaking, one could say that Robin Chakrabarti has come full circle. As a high-school student, the entrepreneur made his pocket money working for recognizable hospitality brands – first at Dairy Queen, and then delivering pizzas for Domino’s throughout university.

Today, the Barrie, Ontario, native is a partner in a private equity firm which, together with other senior restaurant industry specialists, founded RAMMP Hospitality Brands Inc., a company investing in and developing leading Canadian hospitality brands.

These include MR MIKES SteakhouseCasual, The Pantry Restaurant and Rockwell’s Grill & Bar – all well-known brands on Canada’s west coast. “We love the restaurant industry, so that was a natural fit,” says Chakrabarti. “We were looking for new deals and opportunities and businesses to invest in based on prior experience.”

It was a long road from pizza delivery boy to restaurant executive. In university, Chakrabarti studied commerce at the undergraduate level and then completed an MBA. He launched his career working for TD Bank as a corporate lender. While there, he

Photo credit: MR MIKES SteakhouseCasual



Photo credit: MR MIKES SteakhouseCasual

met the owners of Canadian Springs, the bottled water brand, and they invited him to join their growing company. As Vice President Finance and then Regional Vice President Operations, he helped build it from a relatively small company to one making upwards of \$150 million in sales – both through organic growth and acquisitions.

Chakrabarti then moved to a major Canadian restaurant brand, where he met his current business partner, Mike Cordoba. As it turns out, Cordoba shared the same big aspirations, and in 2009 the two launched Empresario Capital Partners. In addition to ventures in the hospitality sector through RAMMP, they also had investments in healthcare (WeCare – recently sold) and continue to invest in Mr. Lube, an auto maintenance service franchise.

The franchise model, explains Chakrabarti, is one that holds particular interest for Empresario moving forward. “We really enjoy the franchise model,” he notes.

“It works because you’ve got a mix of entrepreneurs – both at the franchisor and the franchisee level. As a franchisor, we can take that big-picture view of brand strategy and growing the day-to-day operation, focusing on systems, process and making sure the model works. And as an equal partner, you’ve got the franchisee – an entrepreneur who’s got skin in the game and is focused on making sure their operation runs perfectly under our system’s processes and standards. So you’ve got two very highly motivated sides in the equation.”

So far it is working well for RAMMP’s three hospitality brands, starting with MR MIKES, a modern heritage brand that’s been around for 50 years but had veered away from its well-worn path. At one point, it had 90 stores in Western Canada, but that number dwindled as the previous owners tried to scale up the brand positioning. “We saw right away that the brand had moved away from its customer base and most loyal customers,”

MR MIKE'S STEAKHOUSECASUAL

Franchise Units Canada: 21
Corporate Units Canada: 3
Franchise Fee: \$50K
Startup Capital Required: \$450K-\$550K
Investment Required: \$900k-\$1.2M
Available Territories: BC, AB, SK, MB
Training: Minimum 8 weeks
Average Square Footage: 5150 sf
Average Staff Required: 60
In Business Since: 1960
Franchising Since: 2003
CFA Member Since: 1997

THE PANTRY RESTAURANTS

Franchise Units Canada: 13
Corporate Units Canada: 1
Franchise Fee: \$50K
Investment Required: \$650K-\$850K
Available Territories: BC, AB, SK, MB
Training: 6 weeks
Average Square Footage: 3000 sf
Average Staff Required: 35
In Business Since: 1975
Franchising Since: 1977
CFA Member Since: 1980

ROCKWELL'S GRILL AND BAR

Franchise Units Canada: 3
Franchise Fee: \$50K
Investment Required: \$900K-\$1.2M
Available Territories: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba
Training: 6 weeks
Average Square Footage: 5000
Average Staff Required: 60
In Business Since: 2001
Franchising Since: 2001
CFA Member Since: 1980



says Chakrabarti. “We saw that we could add our expertise by re-engaging the brand with its original customers.”

Chakrabarti and his team did this by adding the ‘Casual’ moniker to the name, focusing on traditional, recognizable dishes and drinks like signature steak, burgers and craft beer and Caesars, and introducing an interior design that promoted an inclusive, casual environment, where everyone could come as they were and feel comfortable.

Prior to embarking on this change, they consulted with the brand’s franchisees and also with their loyal customer base. “The most important thing for the customers and franchisees was that they wanted a casual, fun-filled environment,” notes Chakrabarti. “We were able to work with our existing franchisees, and they played a big part in coming up with some of the new creative and branding aspects.”

The company is also building brand presence through the digital world

of social media. “We want the guest experience not to be just within the four walls of the restaurant, but from a customer’s couch as well. The brand experience should flow seamlessly through the restaurant experience and back again.”

Currently there are 24 MR MIKES locations across British Columbia and Alberta, and plans are in place to open another 50 stores over the next seven years. This includes three new locations soon to launch in Saskatchewan as well as one in Dauphin, Manitoba, and, in 2015, locations in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Fort

McMurray, Hinton and Peace River in Alberta, amongst others. The long-term goal is to open 75 stores across Western Canada and to start looking at expansion into Ontario.

While MR MIKES was in need of a ‘back to its roots’ type of rebooting, The Pantry involved more of a turnaround. The brand had been around for more than 50 years, but it hadn’t evolved in at least 10, necessitating a major rethink. “It required more material change,” explains Chakrabarti. “The menu hadn’t been updated in a long time, the branding elements were stale,

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and the processes and systems hadn't progressed. So it was about kick-starting growth from the ground up."

Chakrabarti and his team rebranded, adding 'home fresh' as a tagline to the name, and renovating the restaurants and revamping the menu while retaining the brand's family-oriented feel. The price point for dishes was maintained, while quality and freshness was beefed up – rather than using sauces from a mix, for instance, they are now made from scratch.

There is also an effort to expand the brand outside of its home market in B.C.'s Lower Mainland, one of the toughest restaurant markets in Canada. "One of the biggest challenges for The Pantry brand is that it has been really Lower Mainland concentrated," says Chakrabarti.

Nonetheless, expansion is on its way. There are currently 13 Pantry restaurants, with two more about to open in Nanaimo and Kitimat, B.C. There is also a location in Fort McMurray, Alberta, and the company is examining further growth into the province as the next step.

Purchased together with The Pantry was Rockwell's Grill & Bar, a small, mid-scale brand that had been owned by the same company. Known for its premium feel and plush furnishings, Rockwell's is an incubation brand, with only three locations on the Lower Mainland.

For now, RAMMP is focusing on growing its more established MR MIKES and The Pantry brands before zeroing in on Rockwell's.

The three brands have an amazing team of go-getters behind them, including Chakrabarti, who brings with him strong executive experience in the hospitality sector, both on the operational and corporate finance side. Even better, Chakrabarti has a passion for the trade and a long-term vision to constantly improve and build the brands.

"I've always been passionate about what I do," he says, "and I've always acted like a business owner, even when I was an employee. I've always had a desire to win, and have worked long hours, and that hasn't changed since turning from an employee into an owner. My partners and I share that drive, and it motivates us to make sure that all of our stakeholders succeed."

RAMMP looks for these same qualities in its franchisees. They keep an eye out for entrepreneurs who share their vision and passion and, ideally, combine it with a strong business background.

"They need to understand that it's not just about the restaurant, but about the restaurant being run as a business," sums up Chakrabarti. "That's how you set yourself up for long term success." 🍁

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