

Food and Family

Interview with Naz Ali

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you and your family with the restaurant?

Religion is a definitely a big part of it because . . . North America is good at acknowledging religious diversity – but North America like Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver, not North America like Fredericton. I mean there is little to no diversity here. Being able to close the restaurant for a month because it's the month of Ramadan and we're fasting, restaurants in those other cities can do that but we can't because people here don't understand it. Having the restaurant stay open until like 1:00 am because some of the clients went to a hotel to drink and want to come later and they're bringing in 30 people when we don't stay open that late and we don't really do that sort of stuff, it's different right?

The restaurant started as a school project, (part of an MBA degree) and me trying to convince my professors that I wanted to choose religion and my own skin and my own morals and ethics as opposed making millions and serving alcohol – that didn't go so well from a business point of view. How can you have a restaurant and not serve alcohol and only open on certain days and not open late into the night? That is the norm in North America. Having differences in culture and religion doesn't go so well with making money.

Trying to explain our differences to customers is a challenge. I had a customer who told me that I should change my religion and that if I did his friends would come here. How do you react to that? To this day I don't know what the right answer is: If I smile and walk away that enables them because they think that they won – they told you something good; if I politely say my piece, just because it's my piece, it comes across that I'm mad at the world. You can't win.

2. What has been the biggest opportunity?

People like you and your friends who come here regularly and are strong advocates of the restaurant and my family. You guys are yeah-sayers and not nay-sayers. It doesn't cost you anything, you don't look for anything in return for telling people about this family from Trinidad who make this amazing food. But you don't really say all that – you just tell people to come to this restaurant because it has amazing food – end of discussion. You don't see colour, religion or race, you just tell people about the amazing food and amazing service at this place.

I just had a client who had us cater for the biggest Christian rock festival in the Maritimes. We had to do 300 meals per meal, per day, for 5 days. Now that's

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Christian – I am Muslim and I'm fasting and working longer hours! But teaming up with cultures like that that allow you to be who you are and in your own skin and comfortable enough – then it makes sense. Having mom and the family be in that environment – thousands of screaming fans at a concert – there was nobody cursing and fighting, everybody is orderly and polite. It doesn't really matter that everybody was Christian, what matters is that we shared the same values.

Right now we just got voted #1 restaurant out of 190 and to have that, it's not like I'm standing up in the wind with my cape blowing and telling everyone: "I'm #1 out of 190!" It's fist pump, I won out of 190. Because, again, how can I be Muslim, brown and with a place that serves no alcohol and be #1 when everybody else is serving alcohol and doing everything else?

3. What is the most important message that you want to give to Canadians who see the photo essay?

No poking at the teachers, but when my professors didn't see my vision – five of my professors at university did not see my vision. They gave me a failing grade. I figured those teachers didn't know what they were talking about so I went to government. I thought government was better. But the five government ministers and the chamber of commerce and business development people, they didn't see my vision. So that's 5 teachers and 5 government ministers, that's 10 community leaders who didn't see my vision.

You have to believe in your own self first – forget about who believes in you because nobody will believe in you like you will believe in yourself. You know deep down inside what your vision is and your core group of people, like my family and friends, you need the support from the people closest to you and then you've got to do it - you've got to prove other people wrong. We continuously, on a daily basis, as Muslims and browns – we're proving people wrong. If I was native or black people would have stereotypes about me – as soon as we see people we judge them. We never really know people's struggles and how their struggles relate to our own. The easiest thing for someone to do is to say something negative about somebody else because they didn't achieve it. I accept that I'm not the best DJ in the world or the best chef in the world, however those people who think that I am – they believe in me and help me to continue on.