



Bahrain's Top Delitician

Sage and Sirloin is Bahrain's premier delicatessen where the customer can expect superior quality with a customized personal touch. **Mureed Nusseir** talks to us about how he overcame start up hurdles through dedication and perseverance. With expansion plans on the horizon - Nusseir can fully enjoy the sweet taste of success

Sage and Sirloin is Bahrain's premier 'delicatessen'. Tell us a little about it and what was the inspiration behind opening up this business in the Kingdom?

I came back to Bahrain from Montreal, Canada in 2005 after working as a Chef there for 5 years. I had ambitions of coming back and opening my own restaurant, as Bahrain was booming at that time. As I started research on a business plan I realized that rents and property prices were really high especially in the Adliya area to open a restaurant, which meant a much

higher start up capital and more time to recuperate the investment.

During this period while shopping at the local supermarkets and large department stores, I realized that these places didn't have high quality fresh meat products. The butchers behind the counter knew the difference between a product that was bad (expired) and good (not expired) but really had no concept of how tender or marbled the meat is and no information about grade etc. So I thought, people order a high quality, high priced steak and burger at a restaurant but don't have the option to purchase it and cook at home. That's how the idea started.



Opposite page clockwise: Sage & Sirloin staff; Shop interior; Shop exterior in Hamala; Canapes from the catering kitchen; Mini burgers from the catering kitchen.

What market research tools did you use to determine a demand for a delicatessen in Bahrain? Was it a challenge to take this venture from an idea to reality?

The hardest thing about this concept was that I had nothing to base my research on. There are no other delicatessens based on meat products in Bahrain, which meant a lot of guesswork had to go into figuring out the demographics of my client base and a suitable location for the business. Taking this idea from a concept to reality was much more difficult than I could imagine as I was a Chef with no experience in the retail business. Luckily I hired a head butcher with 20 years experience from Australia who helped in setting up the business operationally and more importantly he set the hygiene standards that are to this day keys to our success.

Your ingredients and products are top of the line and are imported from around the world. Did you face any hurdles in establishing your global supply chain?

Yes, I faced a lot of hurdles. First indentifying the products to bring into Bahrain, then locating suppliers from around the world and then ordering some samples to make sure that the quality was what I wanted. Then I had to ensure that these companies produce Halal meat, which is about 30 per cent more expensive than the other kind. Once that was done, I had to find a shipping agent that had the best prices but didn't compromise in shipping methods. All my meat is air freighted

and chilled not frozen, so the temperature has to be constantly monitored from the time it leaves the slaughterhouse to the time it enters my shop.

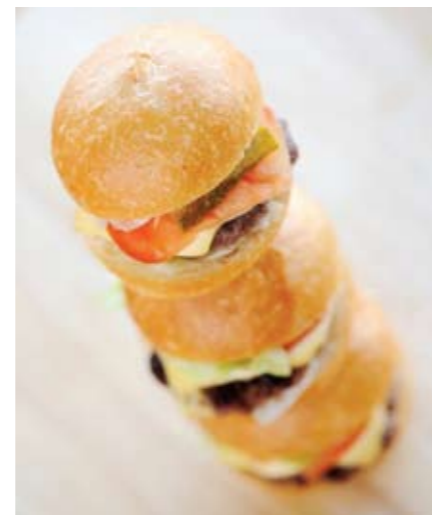
Is there a substantial demand for your product when it comes to the local Bahraini consumer and what trends do you see in the buying patterns of your Bahraini clientele?

Customers were hesitant in the beginning, so it was important that they try the meat to appreciate the quality and justify the price. Also, since the meat is naturally so tender, people generally overcooked it, and so we quickly took the initiative to teach our customers how to cook the steaks.

In general most of my Bahraini clients are the ones that order the leanest and most tender meat. We have also noticed a large number of our customers inquiring about seafood. After conducting a survey, we realized that most of our clients would like to see a fishery section in the shop. So after studying that for over a year now, we recently hired a fish monger/sushi chef and are happy to say that our fishery section will open in September this year.

Did you face any hurdles when venturing into the catering business by launching, 'The Kitchen'? Do you promote your catering through word of mouth only or apply more aggressive marketing tools?

Deciding on the direction of the menu was hard. A few of the obstacles were; do we only use the products from our Delicatessen or not? If we do, how do



we keep our prices competitive? Should we start with an extensive menu or expand it slowly? But the toughest one was finding the right bread. Believe it or not it took us about 4 to 5 months of trying different kinds of breads from different bakery's before we finally found the right type for every section of our menu. Eventually we incorporated as many products as we can from the shop and created a small catering menu with a few salads, sandwiches and canapés. On the promotions front we have done very little advertising for our business and have relied mostly on word of mouth from the start.

What kind of staff training techniques do you employ to maintain a high level of quality and service?

As we deal with a sensitive product and mishandling could lead to food poisoning,



all staff members are required to learn and comply with personal and work hygiene standards. I have one important rule; clients at any time can go and observe the work area in our Butchery. This interaction with the butchers is very vital and an important part of the shopping experience at Sage and Sirloin.

What advice can you offer to budding entrepreneurs?

The most important advice is to try to always do what you love most. But be ready to work long hours on weekdays and forget about your weekends. The first and most important person you need to higher is a good accountant.

Don't believe the hype! When you have an idea think it through and research it. Your friends and family aren't enough for you to sustain your business.

Use the tools available to you. The government has set up some fantastic

initiatives to help small businesses that you won't find in any other country. Contact Tamkeen and Bahrain Development Bank, they will help you. These entities are so much easier to use than people think. **BIG**



One-on-One with Nusseir

What's your favorite part of a typical day? *The interaction I have with my customers, especially seeing them leave my shop with new cooking ideas and a smile.*

What's the least glamorous thing you do regularly in the line of duty? *Going myself and clearing shipments in the heat when required.*

What skills would you most like to improve? *Managerial skills.*

If you could go back in time and do one thing differently in your business, what would it be? *I would have hired an accountant right from the start.*

What part of your job would you gladly give up? *I would gladly give up all the administrative work I have to do.*

What's the simplest thing you never learned to do? *Not to procrastinate!*

What has been your biggest career accomplishment? *Creating a well-known brand in Bahrain that is immediately associated with good quality, customer service and hygiene.*

Who gives you the best advice about your business? *It has to be my older brother Ousama. He is much more business minded than I am.*

What keeps you up at night? *Accounts.*