

Fishing for opportunity

by Aidan Devine

Nicolas De Sousa's first foray into the food industry began with flavourless dough, 25 cents and a dream. He has come a long way since then.



Nicolas De Sousa •

From a child who sold raisin dough to his parents for spare change, he is now one of the four heads of Old Fashioned Fish and Chips franchise – a restaurant phenomenon that has grown to over 70 stores in four years, with 20 more to open within the next 12 weeks.

The Old Fashioned brand has a presence across the country. It has been successful in communities as diverse as Soweto and Pretoria. It has even expanded into Lesotho.

When people believe in you it is much easier to believe in other people

Nicolas says that getting to this point has been a constant voyage of discovery. "Growing up I never held onto my money. I wanted to make it grow, so I always looked for opportunities. I'd sell boerewors rolls outside my parents antique stores with other siblings, CDs to fellow students at school, and just about anything I could think of to generate that little bit of extra cash."

The lessons he picked up have stayed with him forever. "I realised that to be successful I needed to add some kind of additional value to whatever it was I was

supplying. Adding value remains a vital part of De Sousa and Old Fashioned Fish and Chips' philosophy. He says the business constantly strives to give people more than they expect to get out of a service or product.

While the brand has been a franchise for the last four years, it began in 2002 as a standalone take-away in Elma Park, Edenvale. The De Sousas had wanted to create the feeling of a traditional corner fish and chips store but one in a clean, modern setting.

Strive to give people more than they expect

When it became a success the family was approached by other business people for advice on how to start up a food store. They saw this as a sign that franchising might work and the brand was sold as a concept.

De Sousa says that part of the brand's early success was from paying more attention to prospective franchisee's business skills, rather than their background. If someone could prove they had the ability to run a store successfully, their education or experience was not important. Nor, for that matter, was their money.

After a few stores had become successful – attracting anything from 200 to 1 500 people a day – the franchisors started targeting people who did not have funding. This set in motion a mentorship programme to give talented but cash-strapped business people training in management and operating procedures. The aim is to give an entrepreneur in each province a fully funded Old Fashioned Fish and Chips business, after five years of mentorship by the franchisor.

For De Sousa, starting a mentorship programme has a lot to do with karma. Living in England as a younger man,



The De Sousa family

his bank accounts were cleaned out by an ex-girlfriend and he found himself penniless and debt-ridden in a land where he had no family and few friends.

By chance, an acquaintance learned of his financial situation and bailed De Sousa out of destitution with a generous sum of money. He had no obligation to pay it back. It was a gift.

De Sousa has sought to be as charitable to others ever since. Today the acquaintance is now a good friend and has taught him the value of looking at people's potential. "When people show that they believe in you it is much easier to believe in others," he says.

Being in England exposed much to De Sousa. Foremost was the chance to meet his long-time idol Gordon Ramsay.

"He (Ramsay) is exactly as you see him on TV. He is direct, says what he means, and curses – a lot."

The advice Ramsay gave De Sousa was to be true to himself. "He told me, with a few profanities mixed in, that if I wanted to be successful within the restauranting industry I had to love food, and if I didn't I shouldn't bother."

It was simple advice but De Sousa never forgot it. Much of his current enthusiasm for the Old Fashioned Fish and Chips brand is that he loves the menu.

"I don't understand people who never eat at their own restaurants. To me it shows they don't believe in their product. I eat fish and chips regularly. It never feels repetitive. The more I eat it, the more I want to eat it. It has been the same with our franchisees. During their training programmes many worry that they are going to get sick of fish and chips. This never happens and if so, your in the wrong business!"

That his business is a success does not stop De Sousa from wanting more. Outside investors have offered to buy the business numerous times, but the De Sousa family have shot down every one with the prime concern that whoever would take over would never have the passion they currently put into our brand.

"I don't ever want to sell my share of the brand. I know what we can achieve as a brand. What's more, people believe in us now. They know us as Old Fashioned Fish and Chips and they value us. People have bought into the brand. The spirit of those who have invested in us have created our core and that is its strength." 5