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In an exclusive interview with Hodema for HN, Jad Alameddine, director of food and beverage at Mohamed Nasser Al-Hajery & Sons, charts the company's growth story and its expansion from Kuwait into Saudi Arabia

How has Mohamed Nasser Al-Hajery & Sons expanded since its launch?

Mohamed Nasser Al-Hajery was set up in 1946 and has continued to grow ever since. Early on, the company's core business was opening pharmacies, but over the years, it has expanded significantly and today comprises nine departments, ranging from pharmaceuticals/pharmacies to fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), food and non-food items, and restaurants. The food and beverage (F&B) division was formed when the company acquired the distribution rights for Häagen-Dazs in Kuwait. In 2002, we opened the first Häagen-Dazs coffee shop and today we have six, alongside several Häagen-Dazs' points of sale. We also operate Espressamente by Illy Café and Dilmah T Lounge. Our move into the restaurant segment came in 2012, when we acquired the Turkish concept Emirgan Sütis and opened three restaurants. Two years later, we reached another milestone by becoming the master franchise for another Turkish brand, Hatay Sofrasi, opening two outlets in Kuwait. We chose to build on this by adding Khaneen and Solia to our portfolio. Conceived by Chef Ammar Al Fawzan, who remains the brand's Executive Chef today, Khaneen is a local Kuwaiti cuisine concept. There are four restaurants in Kuwait and one in Saudi Arabia. Solia, the latest brand created by the company, is also in both Kuwait, where we have two outlets, and Saudi Arabia, where we have one operating in Riyadh.



Jad Alameddine

What do you believe are the key factors that determine whether or not a restaurant opening is successful?

Great service and great food. I keep hearing that the market is saturated and while I agree that Kuwait probably has too many, my belief is that not enough of them are offering those two elements. Getting that combination right is what will bring longer-term success. Marketing is also important, but because it's evolving so rapidly, it's essential to find the right tools. Without going into too much detail, social media and influencers alone are not enough; you need to find the right mix for your restaurants, something we are proud to have achieved, and which we hope to sustain.

What prompted your decision to take Solia and Khaneen into Saudi Arabia?

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The growth of the Saudi market, especially in Riyadh, presents a great opportunity for us all. The market has a great potential and we believe that our outlets will flourish there.

Five of the brands within the company's portfolio are franchises. Are your plans to focus on acquiring additional franchises or creating your own concepts?

Our strategy is to both create our own brands and also acquire existing brands through partnership. We are always on the lookout for successful businesses and open to a good deal.

What are the key trends in Kuwait's F&B industry today?

High-end restaurants have not found success locally, unlike in Riyadh, which is home to names such as Cipriani and Nozomi. Since this segment is not a feature of the Kuwaiti market, most concepts fall into the middle category, which makes it more challenging for operators. However, I repeat that the key is creating the right combination of great food and great service, with some well-targeted marketing – then you're on your way to success.

How has delivery/online ordering affected the industry?

When I first joined Mohammed Nasser Al-Hajery, we made a very big push for online/delivery and we were successful, jumping from 25 orders daily to around 250. We opened a satellite kitchen and all seemed to be working well. However, the delivery process, along with the delivery platform, takes so much away from your revenue that you are left with almost no profit. We have tried various strategies to address this and today, we have third parties delivering on our behalf, which means less worry for us about the top line.

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