

## Another soup-side attraction for Ravi

With six locations in the city, soup franchise will hit the road with mobile food truck

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

With six bustling downtown locations boasting lunchtime lineups often out the door, Ravi Soups is positioned to take things on the road — literally.

By the end of this year, the successful soup franchise — which began as a sole location in the financial district in the mid-2000s — will launch its very own food truck, ready to serve up its trademark soup anywhere at any time.

Known for its herb-topped soups, sides of fresh bread, and stuffed-to-the-brim wraps, Ravi's food truck endeavour is just another avenue, serving as a staple for soup-lovers across the GTA.

Ravi isn't shying away from bold statements. Claiming status as "Toronto's Favourite Soup Kitchen" and "Best soups and wraps in Toronto," Ravi's hopes its classic white porcelain dishware for diners-in, trendy recyclable take-away packages help it stand out.

That the business is a family affair further cements commitment from staff and patrons alike, says Aashwin Jayakumar, the franchise's general manager. "We are all family now. As soon as people start working with us, they are family."

With a vision to make family recipes mainstream, founder and soup connoisseur Ravi Kanagarajah — who, originally from Sri Lanka, travelled Europe working in the food industry before landing in Canada in 1991 — moved from dishwasher to top-ranked saucier at the renowned Toronto restaurant Mildred Pierce (now Mildred's Temple Kitchen) where his uncle worked.

After dedicating 15 years to Mildred's, he opened the first Ravi location at 322 Adelaide St. W. in 2007 — a location that hadn't seen a business survive in more than a decade.

Six years later, three Ravi franchises dotted the city — including the one on Adelaide, another on Queen St. W. in Parkdale and the third along Dundas St. W., north of Bloor St.

Kanagarajah died in 2013, leaving his 18-year-old son, Jayakumar, to take up the reins (alongside Jayakumar's mother and uncle Kamal Kamadasamy, the head chef).

"Having family helps," explains Jayakumar, who handles hiring, expansion plans and business financials. "The staff was deeply saddened over my father's passing and it was hard to expand the franchise."

But the trio persevered. Keeping Kanagarajah's ambitions on track, three more locations opened their doors on College St., at Queen St. W. and Roncesvalles Ave., and at Yonge and Bloor Sts., bringing the total to six. With a booming catering business, there are plans to move beyond the city's centre.

"Liberty Village and City Place Condominiums (Spadina and Fort York) are ideally next in line, but we are also looking at locations in Leslieville and Mississauga," he explains, adding nothing is firming up for these additional franchises.

Beyond expanding locally, Kanagarajah pondered moving business south of the border and also taking it mobile. "The food truck was my father's idea initially," Jayakumar says.

But a food truck doesn't come cheap, especially in Toronto. There's the cost of the truck and the lengthy application process.

The application fee (for a motorized refreshment vehicle as opposed to a food truck vending permit, only valid for one day and suitable for food festivals) sits at just shy of \$1,200, and must be submitted with a boatload of documentation including truck renderings, articles of incorporation, franchise agreements, proof of insurance, a public health inspection and food handlers certificate, to name a few. If all goes well, it takes 38 days to process.

Ravi Soups submitted its application in June with the intention of being on the road late summer; but sourcing a good truck to retrofit led to delays and held up the application process.

The cost of the food truck varies dependent on whether bought new or used. Jayakumar purchased a



Aashwin Jayakumar, Ravi Soups franchise's general manager, serves the chain's trademark soup and fresh bread.

used vehicle and is in the process of retrofitting it from scratch.

"A food truck can cost between \$60,000 and \$70,000," Jayakumar says. "We will spend close to \$100,000 (in total) gutting and re-building a used FedEx truck, as we want to use new equipment, which is expensive."

Food trucks require at least one generator to run the kitchen equipment, which cost about \$8,000 each,

plus new stainless-steel kitchen grills and refrigerators that start at \$4,000. The mandatory food safety inspection is only \$185, but the pricey city-wide and private-property parking permits can total upwards of \$13,000.

According to Jayakumar, the rising price tag is a cost he can justify given the booming catering business — currently raking in about 50 delivery orders a day — and the in-house food service that serves roughly 1,000 peo-

ple a day across all of its locations.

Not to mention, Jayakumar has been approached by businesses in Etobicoke — though he won't reveal which ones — to station the food truck outside offices over the lunch hour — a driving force behind pursuing the mobile business in the first place.

He also anticipates online business will grow, particularly by expanding delivery service.

How Ravi's food is delivered may change, but the dishes served and how they are made will not, says Jayakumar.

Calling the secret sauce to this family-run enterprise the consistent food quality, Jayakumar promises the mobile restaurant menu will offer the same as fixed locations, including the weekly specials and favourites.

"The chicken wrap, curry lamb wrap and flank steak wrap are our most popular wraps, along with the corn chowder or Ravi Stew," Jayakumar says. Food prep will be done on-site at one of the six franchises and loaded onto the truck from there.

"My favourite is the red pepper bisque because it's delicious. It was one of Ravi's recipes," he adds.

As for any new recipes, Jayakumar and mother are in charge of that, ensuring the same standard across locations and now the food truck.

Whether in the soups served or the people employed, Ravi's is rooted in family. According to Jayakumar, out of about 50 employees, 40 per cent are family members working in and managing the locations.

And to make sure everyone is working accordingly, Jayakumar jumps from location to location, hand-picking managers and helping train new faces at the Adelaide St. location.

He will also choose existing staff to accommodate the new mobile business, holding off on any new hires until a new location — or perhaps food truck — is confirmed.

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