

Troubled Bengal Brasserie back on the menu after buyout

By Clare Weir
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Lisburn Road's Bengal Brasserie restaurant is to re-open next weekend under new management after a rollercoaster few months.

The company behind the popular BT9 haunt was wound up and closed down over debts in June after being saved from administration the year before. Former owner Nigel Rahman was made bankrupt in May over an unpaid drinks bill.

But now two veteran Northern Ireland restaurateurs have come to the rescue, aiming to return the premises to its former glory.

Farooq Ahmed from the Indian Ocean and Arif Ahmed from Jharna and the Indie Spice chain have teamed up to buy the site from administrators KPMG after being named as preferred bidders.

At least four other parties were bidding to take over the reins of the Bengal Brasserie.

Farooq and Arif have over 40 years' combined experience in the restaurant trade and bought their new venture for an undisclosed six-figure sum.

The new company, registered as the Bengal Brasserie Lisburn Road Ltd, will employ between 30-40 people - a mixture of new and old staff members.

The building is currently undergoing a re-fit to incorporate more traditional Indian fixtures and fittings alongside the existing slick, modern interior.

Farooq said that there are no plans to rename or rebrand the restaurant.

He said: "Bengal Brasserie was and is a destination and we want to keep it that way.

"It was part of the fabric of the Lisburn Road and BT9 and we want that to continue -it's under new management, but it is still the Bengal Brasserie and we don't want to confuse or discourage loyal customers.

"The potential was always there with the Bengal Brasserie, the place was packed at weekends, but we want to add a bit more colour, a more traditional feel.

"We're experienced owner-operators and we hope to use that experience to maximise the potential of this place."

Arif added that the emphasis will be on quality and service.

"We want people to have good food and good experiences," he said.

"We are going to be hands-on managers and make sure that people feel homely and comfortable.

"There will be old and new faces - all the people from the old restaurant who wanted their jobs back have got them back."

Arif and Farooq also insisted that while there will be a focus on new dishes, the overall theme will be a traditional Indian menu.

"We will be trying out new things with customers to see if they love it or hate it," said Arif.

"We will be looking at theme nights and innovative use of the restaurant's tea rooms.

"Northern Ireland know what they want from an Indian restaurant and we hope we can provide that for them."

And Farooq played down any worries the pair may have over the recession. He added: "People might say we're mad to consider opening a restaurant in this climate, but it's a great place and we want to put it back on the map.

"If it is a success and if things recover, we will expand. Our other businesses are doing great and we have the experience to make this one work too."

Meanwhile, the Rahman family is understood to still have an interest in the Ormeau Road Bengal Brasserie.

It has emerged that a company called Bengal Brasserie Belfast Ltd was set up in April by Mr Rahman's brother, Mitun Ahmed.

The firm is registered to the address of Zeera on the Ormeau Road, a takeaway formerly run by Nigel Rahman.

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