

Connect (August 26, 2009)

New Beginnings

Unlike most foreigners, **Lalita de Goederen** and her husband weren't sent to India by anyone-it was their own choice to come to the land of opportunities. And now Lalita runs Bagel's Café in Delhi's suburb Gurgaon. We asked her about what it means to be an entrepreneur and café owner in India.

How did the setting up of the café come about?

I came in India in January 2008 and was planning to join the same company I was working for in Holland-Burson-Marsteller, a public relations firm (in India they are present as Genesis Burson-Marsteller). But then I thought that this was probably the best time for me to start my own business. I like the food business and have worked in it, first as a steward and then as manager while I was studying in Amsterdam. I also helped set up a restaurant in Amsterdam while I was working as a communications specialist.

I thought, what do I miss, and what is not there in Delhi yet? And I realized that the answer was bread. We Dutch eat bread for breakfast, lunch and sometimes even in the evening. We eat bread with cheese and any kind of butter. More specifically, bagel is something you don't have in Delhi. This was surprising since there are so many international restaurants and cafés in Delhi. So I thought why not start a bagel café?

I started last year in June with registering my company and looking for a place. I found this place in November and then I finally opened the café in June this year. So it took exactly a year for me from registering the company to starting operations.

Were there any problems while setting up?

I wouldn't call them problems, but challenges. First of all, setting up a business is tough anywhere. Even if I were in Holland, in Amsterdam, it would have been tough to set up. To find out what it takes to register a company, where to set it up, where to find the people to work for you-all this is an effort you need to put in.

I am persistent and believe in putting in a 110 percent. In the end it paid off, even if it took one year. Maybe it would have taken somebody else a little less time, but I wanted to do everything my way, and so I refused to take on a partner, who would have helped me get things done faster. For instance, opening a bank account for the company needs several kinds of documents, and then it takes long to open it. And if there are issues that crop up, that takes further time. The way of working is different between India and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, if someone says they will do something by the next day, they will. Here, it could mean the next week or even month. You can't be sure. In the process of setting up, I have learnt patience and to not expect everything to happen when people say it will. And now that I have learnt all this, it is easier for me to deal with it.

Having said that, I would strongly advise others planning something like this against going it completely alone-especially if you are a woman. It is easier if you take on an Indian partner.

Another example was in the construction of this place. I decided to get it done myself. I was hoping it would be done by February this year but it took longer. Meanwhile, in March I had a baby. It took me some time to get back into things after my son was born. After a few weeks when I got back to work, I had to literally be here night and day to get things done. But it was all worth it when I started my restaurant on June 18th. It felt like I had two babies this year!



Lalita de Goederen

How did you decide on the menu items? Did you conduct a survey or talk to people?

Once I decided that bagels would be the main item on which the menu would be based, I worked on the menu myself, especially since I knew what would go best with a bagel. But before deciding on a bagel café itself, I did a lot of research. I networked with people in the business-in fact, that's all I did for the first six months. This was to find out if people here would like bagels, as well as to find out what it takes to start and run a restaurant in India.

Everyone was positive about bagels and so I decided to go ahead with it. However, I also decided to add some other main dishes, so I also have some pastas, meals-in-a-bowl, salads, soups and eggs-to-order. Bagels and eggs-to-order are very much a breakfast and lunch item in Europe and America. Salads are also for lunch. And for dinner, there are the soups, pastas and meals-in-a-bowl. And then there are of course, bagels. But having all this allows me to offer a full-service restaurant instead of just a simple café. I am open from 9 in the morning to 10 in the night so that people can come for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Are there any typical Dutch items on the menu?

It is usually the ingredients I use that are typically Dutch. For instance, there are chocolate sprinkles and crumbs, which I import from Holland. The different cheeses I use are also Dutch. Apart from that the simple bagel with peanut butter is also typically Dutch. Most of the items are, in fact, imported. From Italy, France, Norway, America. In about two weeks I will have a very special, very typically Dutch item coming in-the stroopwafel! The machine has arrived at the Delhi customs and soon I will have it with me. Then I'll start making my own stroopwafels and will offer them on my menu. Since it has been about seven weeks since I started the café, I am able to assess which items are moving fast and which items are not. So, I have decided to add more typically Dutch items-for instance, stroopwafels and pancakes. I am also going to have daily specials and there we will have Dutch items.

But I must say that the bagel is not Dutch, though it is European. In fact, the café itself is not a typically Dutch venue, but yes, it's a European concept.

How would you compare your café with a typical café in the Netherlands in terms of the people who come and how they enjoy the food.

I had actually expected a lot of foreigners to come to my café, but surprisingly, I mostly have Indians coming in. A lot of them are NRIs and those who are well-travelled. They are familiar with bagels and have tried them before elsewhere. But even those who haven't, enjoy them and come back for more. I haven't done marketing, but by word of mouth more and more corporates are coming in. A lot of them also go for the take-away option.

If I had set up in the Netherlands, the crowd would have been similar-lots of corporates, and also just youngsters. But even here, for youngsters, there is Wi-fi, so it's a place where they can relax and spend hours and work without being bothered by anyone or by loud music. And it would be the same if it were in the Netherlands.

If you are here with kids, I have papers with a picture of Mr Bagel that they can sit and colour. I get a lot of families with kids on the weekends. Apart from the activities, the children enjoy the bagel itself.

Other than the café, how has been your experience in India?

Very good! Unlike most people, we decided on our own to move to India. Almost every foreigner we know has come to India either because they work at the embassy or for a company that has sent them here.

Since my husband and I decided ourselves, we knew what to expect and we were all for it. It was something that we wanted to do and we are happy with that choice. If I hadn't liked it, I wouldn't have set up a company. Because when you decide to do that, you know you have to be here for a while.

It was a challenge from the beginning because we had no house, didn't know the city or anyone. All we knew was that my husband had a job in Delhi. It was all a challenge but also a big learning process. And because we are here to stay for a while, it was useful. In fact, it's been very good.

What I missed in Holland and definitely find here is that people are always trying to make the most of life. In Delhi especially, people are always looking to start new ventures and are excited. I like that there are so many entrepreneurs here and you can always arrange anything you want. There's always something happening, which is good, but then you have to watch out because you could be working 24/7 yourself. There is a buzz here that I can't describe!