

# Mark Wright: Indian Food King & Fast Food Disruptor

**You haven't heard of them yet, but you will.**

East London Indian street food start-up Rola Wala is about to take the world by storm. With plans to eventually be in six countries, starting with at least one international unit by the end of the year.

Founder Mark Wright began his career in the advertising industry. He had no interest in food when he moved to London 10 years ago. Now he is the head of a fast-growing, spice-fuelled, 500-calories-or-less, Indian food chain. His story is unlikely, but his passion genuine.

Mark sat us down to tell us why an Aussie would launch an Indian food chain in the first place and about their new branch opening in Spitalfields this month, serving up sourdough naan and a #SaagwalaPaneer filling, not to mention free meals for the first 300 customers.



**Wright:** When I came here [to London], I wasn't into food. I didn't even eat onions or mushrooms. When I got here, there wasn't as much choice as there is now, but there were these great businesses that I would go to all the time. One was 'Sausage and Mash'. They were great; one of those single site restaurants which did things really well at a price you were prepared to pay. Great tasting food. What a restaurant should be. Come back to places like this after a while and suddenly they have 2, 3, 4, 5 restaurants open and you go, 'what happened? Prices have gone up. Service isn't great.' And that

actually pisses me off. *Laughs.* Really pisses me off.

Step forward a few years. I went to India and fell in love with the food and flavours of the cuisine in that part of the world.

It all started with a roadside chicken tikka. I loved it so much, I asked for the recipe and got only half of the ingredients because [the vendor] couldn't figure out how to tell me the other half.

When I came home, I was going to all these Indian restaurants and thought, 'I'm going to spend all of my salary on this, so I might as well learn to make it.' I wanted to cook the world's best chicken but only had half of the recipe. My girlfriend had buggered off to Uganda and I had six weeks with nothing to do, so I started trying to figure it out.



**iRATE:** You sound like the ideal boyfriend. Girlfriend disappears for six weeks and you spend it in the kitchen cooking.

**Wright:** *Laughs.* I started the business and she came back and I was too busy to see her. Now I'm no longer with her.

It's taken three and a half years to develop the business because we still have calls about the chicken. [I don't remember] the number of times I've called Danny (another business partner) at 1am and said 'It's not a good time, but we gotta talk about the chicken.'

We got it a couple of times and I'm like, 'Dude, we've done it. We have to put it in a time capsule to prove it!' We aren't 100% perfect all the time, but I feel like we almost get there most of the time which most businesses can't say. I would say we hit it 99% of the time.

How can we grow in a way that maintains the quality and the service? We've developed our model to make sure we grow in a way that defends our values: our flavour and quality.

Our business works as a single restaurant, but the model is set for scale. A lot of businesses see growth and, rather than develop with their suppliers, they simply switch to new suppliers that can a) handle the higher volume and b) do it cheaper.

We like to work with the best producers so it's about saying, 'how can we take you with us' as we grow. Scale economics. To me, it's not just about making things cheaper to support a margin, but using the power of scale to make things better for everybody. What we are doing now works, so let's do more of it and grow together. We've done this with Square Root London and our Mango Soda, and I'd like to think there will be others too.

**Why do you feel that companies start changing when they grow? Are they just trying to exploit what they have for everything it's worth?**

**Wright:** No. I don't think it's quite that black and white. I understand the challenge with trying to grow a business to our level, but I've never built it to theirs. But I also know there are some key things that you need to hang your hat on as you grow a business and these things for me are the things I hope will define us.

In Leeds, we opened up next to a 'Tortilla' and thought, 'fuck, we need to be just like them.' On the street, we've always used our hands to make the food, with gloves on (*he adds for reassurance*), because that's how you do it. When someone says I want this ingredient and that ingredient, we get in there and actually make it because that's how you do it in India.

We saw guys making food with tongs and thought 'that's how we

are supposed to do it'. So when we opened, we tried, but it felt really horrible and there was no atmosphere in the restaurant. I said, 'guys, throw away the tongs, get your hands in there'. The second I did that, it felt like our business again. It has to feel right.

Anyone who sets up a business is very passionate. They have to be. I don't think they say, 'let's turn it into a cash cow.' It's just that as the business grows, it becomes more about running the business. Everyone is caught up in 'how are we going to do this? How are we going to employ enough people?'

When we were opening in Leeds, there were points along the way where we were like 'this is going the wrong way.' I worried about whether we were going to be around in six months. I could see long-term where we needed to go, but couldn't see the intermediate steps. So I can see how easy it is to get off track.

It becomes more about delivering to a margin. It's a values drift. As you grow your business, your values tend to drift.



### **What's driving you under the hood?**

**Wright:** For me, it's about doing something new. Things which push the barrier a bit. The core thing is that if my business is my creative outlet, then it is genuinely somewhere that I would want to go to myself.

We have four directors in the business and they are all strong personalities, so when it comes down to a decision of 'where do we go next?'

We are involved with the One Feeds Two charity which runs a similar model to TOMS shoes. For every pair of shoes they sell, they provide a free pair to someone in need. Via our charity partner, we are able to provide a free meal for every

roll we sell. Since we've started that, we've been able to provide 300,000 meals in three years which is huge.

My partner Mark (the other Mark in the business) became the trustee of their board. He approached me and said, 'what do you think about this?' My rationale for that is kind of airy fairy, but for me and everyone involved, it's a lifestyle choice. I'm not forced to come here, or I die.

**You won't die if you don't have a Rola Wala.**

**Wright:** Well, I might but no one else will. *Laughs.* Basically, though, not everyone has that choice and the thrust of One Feeds Two is that they provide school meals to hungry children and that gets them into school. It's a longterm vision to feed them at school today so they can also feed their minds which means they'll be able to feed their community tomorrow. That's something I can really buy into.

**So how are you changing the game in your new branch at Brushfield Street?**

**Wright:** I'm a very visual thinker and I always start with what the food likes like and work backwards.

**Your food always looks like a work of art. Maybe you should say 'Rola Wala, food you can hang on a wall.'**



**Wright:** *Laughs* You are putting words in my mouth, but I'm happy for you to do that.

**Yes. We will attribute it to you. (We lied.)**

**Wright:** Brushfield is not sit-down; it's a hole in the wall. I want people to go there and get the biggest flavours you can get. It just happens to also be healthy. In terms of the menu, we've gone out of our way to source some really cool stuff. We've got some Indian black bean noodles that are 45% protein

and carb free.

**Are they FODMAPs (do they make you fart)?**

**Wright:** No. Actually the spices stop that.

The menu is something that anyone can eat. High carb, low carb. Love the gluten. Hate the gluten. It's something that's been important since day one. I want the food to be inclusive. Food is community. Half of the menu is vegan/vegetarian.

**So what's next for Rola Wola?**

**Wright:** We've just done a franchise deal in Dubai.

**Dubai? You know that would be like setting up in Mumbai right? That's like Starbucks going to Rome.**

**Wright:** We were actually approached by an international franchise group. It's a family-run business. Really great guys behind it. They approached us on a no-fee, profit-sharing basis. Literally overnight we had offers rolling through. We now have plans to be in six countries eventually.

**Has this gone faster or slower than anticipated?**

**Wright:** Till now, it's gone slower but it's definitely ramping up. The most important aspect to growth is having the right people. We look for people who don't just tow the company line. They take on the brand. What has worked for us is finding people who adopt this mindset in an almost maniacal way. The brand becomes them. I've never seen anything like it. You wouldn't walk into Starbucks and say, 'I am Starbucks', but when you meet our staff you say 'that guy is actually Rola Wala'.

The whole concept of Rola Wala is this mysterious traveling person, the man or woman who rolls. It's this idea of this mysterious person. Essentially people like me. We attract well-travelled and open-minded people.

At the end of the day, what is the core of running a restaurant? It's having a great fucking menu that everyone wants to go and eat. And then when they are there, we serve them really well. And they walk away and say 'fuck, that was a really good price and I want to come back'.

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