

Speech and Hearing Impaired Individuals Run the Show at This Mumbai Restaurant!

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Mirchi and Mime is an innovative restaurant in the Powai area of Mumbai. It boasts of a friendly wait staff of 27 servers, all of whom are hearing and speech impaired.

I have often heard my parents and others from the previous generation grumble about how eating out has lost its charm. The focus, they feel, has shifted from a diner-centred experience to a money-making enterprise. Another complaint that I often hear from them is that servers these days rarely smile. And given that I cannot remember any server flashing me a genuine smile while taking my order or serving me, I am forced to agree.

Mirchi and Mime then is a game-changer in more ways than one! Nestled in the Powai area of Mumbai, not only does this restaurant boast of a friendly waitstaff that offers service with a smile (a rarity in itself!), but all 27 servers are hearing and speech impaired (SHI, for short).

While one might be tempted to assume that having a meal in this restaurant is a complicated process, experience shows otherwise.

The process is simple – all menus list not only the food available, but portion sizes and other eating paraphernalia like salt, pepper, spices, sauces, and even cutlery. Every point of information has an accompanying illustration that depicts the hand-gesture for the same in sign language.



Diners are required to simply mimic these hand-gestures to place their orders. What's more, a placard announcing the name of the dish accompanies every dish brought to the table.

This unique 80-seater bar and grill restaurant was started by Prashant Issar and Anuj Shah. Alums of the Henley School of Business (UK), these MBA graduates were driven by the values taught at their alma mater: "One of the core values we learnt at our B-School was that while generating individual wealth is important, it is far more important for every business to generate wealth for the society as well. That was something that stayed with us," Issar says.

"Both of us were thinking of starting a business. I have been in the restaurant business for 22 years now and Anuj also has experience in the same field. So, we thought we will open a restaurant because that is what we are good at," said Issar.

That is when the duo heard of Signs, a Toronto-based restaurant that functions on a similar concept. And just like that, a restaurant like Mirchi and Mime became a distinct possibility.

It wasn't all smooth sailing though. "We decided to test it out since we were a bit sceptical of it working in India. You see, India is very different from the West, the societal gap between the diners and the servers is a lot wider in India. So we were wondering whether it will work out well."

They started by meeting the boys and girls who would go on to become the most popular fleet of servers in the restaurant business.

Their first hurdle was communicating with the SHIs. Initially, Issar and Shah would communicate with the parents of the SHIs, who would then sign to their children. The replies of their children then had to be translated for Issar and Shah. "It was getting a bit too much so we decided to learn the sign language ourselves. Once we started communicating with them directly, it helped us understand their mindset much better," Issar recalls.

The hearing and speech impaired boys and girls were more than enthusiastic to be a part of this initiative. They saw an opportunity to prove that they were just as capable as others. Convincing the parents however, was a different story!

"Being a parent of a different child makes you much more protective. It took a lot of convincing to get the parents to send their kids out into the world," Issar added.

Once everyone was on board, the ball was set rolling. Mirchi and Mime became a reality in March 2015.



In the short span of one year, the eating joint has already carved a niche for itself, pushing the owners to explore the idea of more outlets. This is no easy feat in a business where new restaurants open and close in the blink of an eye. What is their secret?

"The key attributes to succeed in the service industry are focus, intuitiveness and friendliness. Our servers have all of this. In my 22 years of experience in the restaurant business, my main struggle has been to get the servers to smile. Here, that is an attribute already present in these boys and girls," Issar says. "We also remind ourselves constantly that it is not a social enterprise, it is a business. If it does not make money, it will be a flash in the pan and will shut down and people will forget about it. It is not about sympathy or empathy. We define our restaurant as a stylish, global, cutting-edge dining space, which happens to be served by SHI people," he says.

According to him, when a customer complains about something he actually feels happy since that means that people are treating their restaurant as just another restaurant, and not as a charity that demands pity. "Dining at Mirchi and Mime is an experience in itself and not only for the fact that you need to use sign language to order your food. Going by the [rave reviews](#) it is getting (it has a whopping 4.8 rating on Zomato!), the food is well worth your time and doesn't burn a hole in your pocket.

"There are some restaurants that serve great food, there are others that have a beautiful ambience and setup, while yet others are known for their innovative ideas in food, service and design. Never before have we seen all these together under one roof, and that too in a restaurant that has its heart in the right place!" – says one of the reviews of the restaurant.



[The owners – Prashant Issar and Anuj Shah](#)

It is clear that Issar and Shah – who want to open 21 more restaurants with SHI employees – are doing something right. “In our company, we employ people for their abilities and not their disabilities,” says a proud Issar.

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