

Anyone with a brother or sister knows it can at times be hard to stay on speaking terms, so what kind of relationship does it take for siblings to operate a successful business in a pressurised field such as hospitality? *Humayun Hussain* finds out

# FAMILY AFFAIR

Working with your sibling can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, you have someone you know inside out; on the other, you face working with someone when you know all their idiosyncrasies and weaknesses.

But a glance at the sibling relationships that are at the heart of some of the most successful hospitality ventures suggests that brother or sister set-ups are not uncommon.

Examples in London alone include Chris and Jeff Galvin (Galvin Bistrot de Luxe and Galvin at Windows), Namita and Camellia Panjabi (Amaya, Veeraswamy, Chutney Mary and Masala Zone), Tom and Robert Aikens (Tom Aikens, Tom's Kitchen and the soon-to-open Tom's Place), Ben and Hugo Warner (the Benugo chain), Tom and Ed Martin (the Gun, the White Swan, the Well, the Empress of India and the soon-to-open Prince Arthur), and Sam and Eddie Hart (Fino and Barrafinna). In Kent, there are Steve and Phil Harris (the Sportsman).

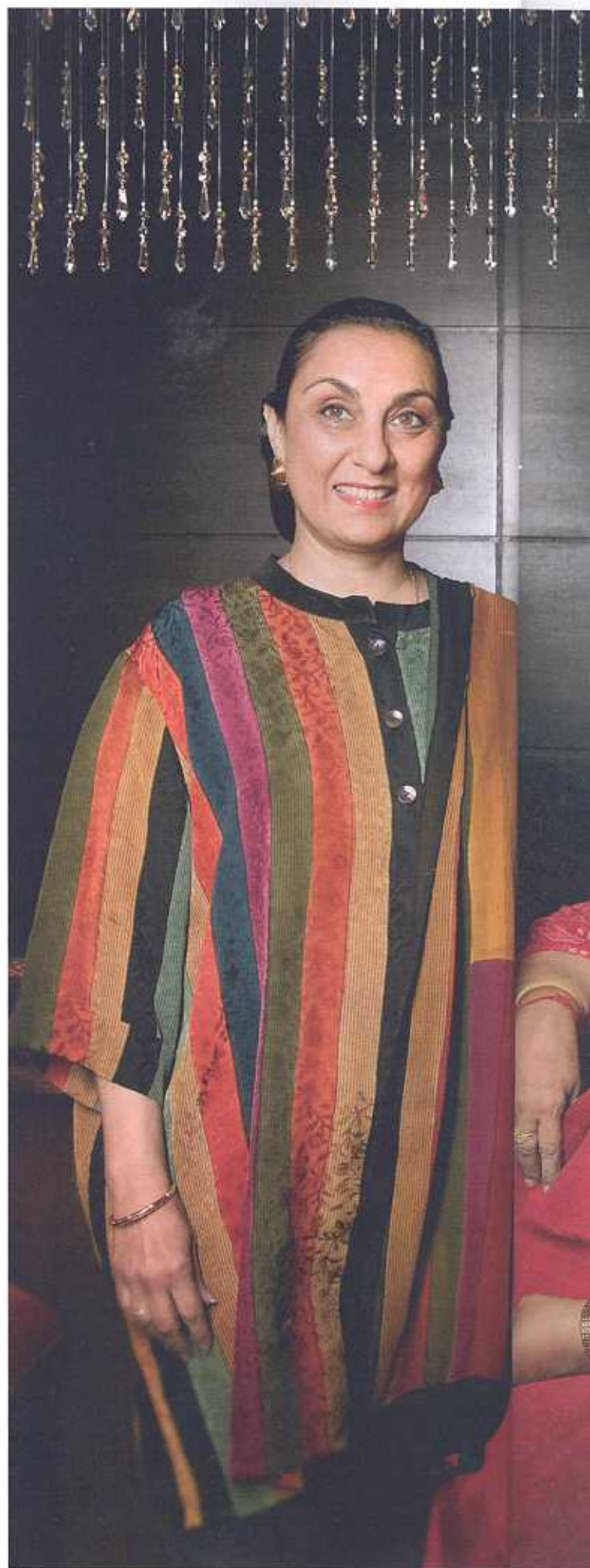
"We can have rows," says Ben Warner, "but because we are family it tends to be forgotten about. Trust is paramount. I can go on holiday with my family and entirely trust Hugo with the business. It's a relationship you don't always get with a non-fam-

ily business partner. There is a level of intimacy and security."

Phil Harris concurs, but adds that it isn't always plain sailing. "We have had huge and spectacular rows," he says, "and Steve is the only person I've ever punched as hard as I could, but ultimately we have the same goal. In most partnerships, there is so much pushing and pulling, which can be quite detrimental to the business, but we always sort it out. Steve is the chef and I'm front of house and the two sides haven't always seen eye to eye. We overcome those hurdles through understanding and compromise."

It's one thing to have an intimate level of communication between siblings, but staff aren't always as chued up. "If there aren't clear-cut divisions of work," Warner notes, "which can be the case in businesses run by siblings, it can create confusion for your employees. You have to be clear in who is saying what to whom."

All siblings raise the point that they never switch off. "I really get on with Tom and we even go on holidays together," Ed Martin says. "But there is no escaping from talk about work, which can be quite claustrophobic. But I also know that I'm very lucky to be working with my brother, who is totally trustworthy and reliable."







Namita (left) and Camellia Panjabi "never get upset with each other" in running their business, Masala World



## SIBLINGS... THE SUCCESS STORIES

### NAMITA AND CAMELLIA PANJABI

#### ● Restaurants:

**Amaya**

Covers: 90

**Veeraswamy**

Covers: 122

**Chutney Mary**

Covers: 110

**Masala Zone**

Covers: Upper Street, Islington, 100;

Soho, 162

Total number of staff in all restaurants:

306

Indian-born sisters Namita and Camellia Panjabi, along with Namita's husband, Ranjit Mathrani, are directors of Masala World, the group which owns some of London's finest Indian restaurants, including the Michelin-starred Amaya, and the Masala Zone chain.

When Namita launched Masala World's first restaurant, Chutney Mary, in 1991, Camellia was still with the Taj Hotel group and had been instrumental in the opening of Bombay Brasserie, in 1982. She joined Masala World as company director in 2003.

Namita and Camellia have been at the forefront of revolutionising and modernising the Indian restaurant scene in the UK, with the group currently undergoing rapid expansion with Masala Zone.

**Caterer** What was your childhood like, and how did you become interested in the food and restaurant business?

**NP** We had a very happy childhood in Bombay, where we were born. Even though Camellia is four years older than I am, we have always got along fabulously. We were girls, but we were brought up to believe by our parents that nothing is impossible and that the world's your oyster. Our mother, who was a doctor, didn't have much time to cook, but she ensured that we had very good cooks at home. Also, our maternal grandmother made a point of preparing some exceptionally fine seasonal and special occasion dishes.

**CP** Bombay is a melting pot of many different cultures. At school, during lunchtimes, all the children would

open their tiffin boxes and we would all get to taste each other's food. Namita and I also quite enjoyed the street food stalls that were near the school.

**Caterer** How did you come to be working together?

**NP** I had always been saying to Camellia to join us but, even before she took up our offer, she was always my sounding board and I would speak to her twice a day about what I was doing with the restaurants Ranjit and I were opening.

**CP** It made complete sense to join Namita. We have so much in common.

**Caterer** What is the best thing about keeping it in the family, and what are the areas of contention?

**NP** It's been a lot fun for us both. We never have to worry and there is complete loyalty and trust between us both. If there is a downside, it's just that we never stop talking about work.

**CP** It's a million times better than working with a non-family member. There is an unspoken understanding and acceptance of each other. We never get upset with each other and, if one of us doesn't succeed with something, we will urge the other to try again and again.

**Caterer** What is the division of labour between you, and who is the stronger personality?

**NP** I deal with more on the taste, quality control and presentation side whereas Camellia is very much in charge of the conceptualisation side of the restaurants. But it isn't always as cut and dried as that.

**CP** Namita's palate and her ability to deconstruct and reconstruct a dish is amazing. We have no worries about overstepping the mark or have any constraints or parameters about who's doing what and in what proportion.

**Caterer** Plans for the future?

**NP** At the moment, we are concentrating on more London Masala Zone sites, with four branches scheduled to open within the next six months. ▶