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SPOTLIGHT Food

"After school, I'd come into the restaurant and do my homework in the office. That was my life growing up." — Luck Sarabhayavanija

Newark exterior where Ani Ramen commissary will be located. - L + M DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

Finding a fortune

Ani Ramen quickly grew to five restaurants around the state and it's still expanding

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Luck Sarabhayavanija's childhood was shaped by restaurants. His family has run eateries in the city and North Jersey, and 25 years ago opened Montclair's first Thai restaurant.

"After school, I'd come into the restaurant and do my homework in the office," Sarabhayavanija said. "That was my life growing up."

He knew by age 19 that he wanted a career in the restaurant business; and from busser to server to manager, he noticed something.

"I look at it like a Broadway play. If you're a server or a bartender, you're one of the actors. If you're a manager, you're part of production, you're behind the scenes," he said.

Sarabhayavanija is the founding partner of Ani Ramen, a New Jersey ramen chain established in 2014 and now with five locations and at least four to come this year. The sixth location, set for The Hahne & Co. building in Newark, will also house a 5,000-square-foot commissary kitchen to supply the growing number of locations with 14-hour-slow-cooked ramen broth and certain other food items.

It's a focus on consistency for Ani, a restaurant that wasn't planned with growth in mind. It was supposed to be a side hustle when it opened in 2014, Sarabhayavanija said, but things didn't work out as planned: He now accounts for a couple hundred employees and thousands of customers each week.

BEGINNINGS

Ani Ramen is not Sarabhayavanija's first crack at owning a restaurant. He and his wife moved out west to Vancouver -- her hometown -- in 2005 and opened a restaurant the following year. It made him realize that there was a lot more to learn, he said, and after they sold it in 2008, he saw working for a larger restaurant group as an opportunity to gain the necessary knowledge. After some time at Vancouver-based Glowbal Restaurant

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Luck Sarabhayavanija has created collaborations with other sought-after brands and incorporated other complementary businesses into Ani Ramen house. - LYNN HAZAN of CHICPEA JC

RAMEN

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Group, he got a job opening restaurants for New York-based Tao Group Hospitality. Three years later, he was director of the company.

He and Israel Jiles, who eventually became one of his partners at Ani, opened Manhattan hotspot Beauty & Essex together, among others. A chance invite to a ramen pop-up nearby made something click for Sarabhayavanija, who decided then to dive into the ramen concept back home in New Jersey. Thus, Ani was born.

Their pre-opening goal was 50 bowls per day, 100 on the weekends. They quickly blew themselves out of the water though, and within six months of opening, a Friday night wait was 30 minutes. A writer from the New York Times stopped by unannounced three times, and when she finally got in the door a fourth time, her review of Ani Ramen took them from a 30 minute wait on a Friday night to an hour and a half.

"The second that came out, we realized it was something really amazing we had in our hands. If we wanted to make it consistent, we should focus on product, hospitality, and operation, and start to scale this and open a second location," he said.

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT

Traditional ramen starts with pork broth or chicken broth, and often includes dashi, or fish stock. Ani offers both chicken and pork varieties, and much to the chagrin of purists, offers a vegan broth as well. None of their broths have dashi to accommodate those with seafood allergies. Sarabhayavanija has endured backlash for both decisions, but he's just giving the people what they want: After he put the first Ani Ramen sign up in Montclair in 2014, he had 70 missed calls and 30 voicemails on his business line after a weekend. Of those, 75 percent were inquiring about a vegetarian option and 25 percent were inquiring about a vegan one.

"We had our consulting chefs, two guys who've been doing ramen for over 20 years combined, who've made a whole bunch of chicken and pork broths. To get them to focus on a vegetarian broth now, it wasn't something they were used to," Sarabhayavanija said.

But executive chef Julian Valencia made it happen. Now, vegetarian ramen accounts for 20 percent of the thousands of bowls of ramen the locations sell each week.

Thousands of bowls a week—broken down to "300 to 400 per day per location on weekends, and 175 to 350 per day per location on weekdays"—is more than Sarabhayavanija and crew ever hoped for or expected in what "was supposed to be a side hustle."

The hardest part of growth for Sarabhayavanija, Valencia, Jiles, and partner Kathleen Reyes has been the transition from working in the business to working on the business.

Ani Ramen became well-known for its house-made pork, chicken and vegetarian ramen broths, using Sun Noodles. - Aaron Houston

"We fell in love with the restaurant industry because we love hosting, we're true operators. We love the process of opening and closing, and the instant gratification of serving guests," he said. "Fifteen years ago, if you told me I'd be in an office all day staring at spreadsheets, I wouldn't have signed up for this."

But Ani Ramen is bigger than its partners now. They're doing real estate deals, scouting locations, and doing full buildouts of new restaurants. The team already has more locations than partners—five versus four. Hence the importance of the commissary kitchen, still in buildout phase itself: there needs to be a central location for someone to make sure that the product across locations showcases Ani as, at its heart, a mom and pop shop that cares about its product and its patrons.

"One of the biggest mistakes restaurants make when they grow is the product isn't the same. Then you start to be associated with 'chain restaurant' and it's not a good thing. It's lost its soul," he explained.

For the time and money it took to start the commissary kitchen, they could have opened six restaurants. But they focused on the commissary "to make sure that wherever you go, whether it's lunch in Montclair, dinner in Summit, or Jersey City at 2 a.m., that you have the same pork, the same tofu in the veggie bun," he said.

And though the success and need to scale have been a surprise, they haven't been an accident.

"Accidental in how much it's scaled, yes, but in having a great product? There's no accident in that. There's countless hours [of work]," Sarabhayavanija said.

Ani Ramen has him seeing something he'd never before seen in restaurant operations before: For Facebook ads, businesses choose a target audience to promote to. Ani Ramen's mass appeal has him selecting from 12 years old to 70 years old. Those numbers are represented in house.

"If you come watch us at any of our locations, on a Friday night between five and six you'll see six different high chairs; from six to seven, you'll see high school or university kids catching a meal before they catch a movie; and after that you'll see couples and groups of diners waiting to experience our ramen," Sarabhayavanija said.

"We go through a whole wave, it's like coming to a house party. Every single type of diner is here. One of the first top 10 questions [restaurant owners are asked] is 'who's your ideal diner?' and it's really easy for us to answer that question, because we have it all."

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