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For a taste of home

By CHOI TUCK WO**Should the craving for Malaysian grub grab you when in Manchester, head for Ning's.**

FROM kampung boy to restaurant boss, Norman Musa has displayed an amazing appetite for hard work. And it doesn't stop there. The 33-year-old is multi-talented, having performed before Queen Elizabeth II and former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

For he also dances occasionally for the Nusantara performing arts group, set up by his aunt, Maziah Omar, in Nottingham.



Funky fusion: Norman Musa (right) and Andy Spracklen outside Ning.

Indeed, Norman's zest for life appears inexhaustible – he's a cook, dancer, creative designer, event organiser and above all, he runs Manchester's funkiest Malaysian restaurant.

In this respect, he has virtually single-handedly, with support from his business partner, Andy Spracklen, designed and set up Ning Canteen, Café & Restaurant.

As far as Malaysian cuisine is concerned, Norman's philosophy of "doing little very well, rather than trying to do a lot not very well" appears to have borne fruit.

Ning's emphasis on quality is evident. Instead of 100 dishes or so, there are only 10 to 15 main course favourites and less than eight appetisers.



Bespoke wallpaper brightens up Ning's stylish interior. – Pictures courtesy of Ning

Barely nine months old, the restaurant has already taken the city by storm, attracting rave reviews in the British media.

“Our aim is to deliver fresh, authentic home-cooked food in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere,” said Norman.

He also takes pride in the restaurant’s stylish interior, complete with bespoke wallpaper and bar with Malaysian batik prints.

“I bought the batik in Penang Road (in his hometown, Penang),” he declared with refreshing candour.

Norman’s passion for cooking is understandable; he had helped his parents in their food business in Butterworth since his childhood days.

As there’s only one Malaysian café, catering mostly to students in Manchester, he felt there was a need for another that could offer a different ambience and service for customers.

From a buzzing canteen atmosphere during lunch-hour right through to a chilled-out restaurant in the evening, Ning appeals to office workers, residents and visitors alike.

Simplicity and style, quality and value, individuality and hospitality – these are the core values that make Ning stand out.

But why Ning?

Norman was quick to point out that the name had nothing to do with Malaysian singer Ning Baizura.

“Well, Ning is easy to remember and it rhymes with opening and happening,” he explained.

The truth, however, is that he was inspired by his aunt’s use of the Balinese musical notes *nang*, *ning*, *nong* – the equivalent of *do*, *re*, *mi*.

And since he’s the middle child in the family, he went for the central note *ning* for the restaurant.

Once Ning is firmly established, Norman said they might study the possibility of setting up Nang and Nong restaurants in major cities like Newcastle, Birmingham and Edinburgh in future. They

have ruled out London for the time being, due to stiff competition.

Spracklen said he was passionate about Malaysian food and the country's cultural diversity, where "eating is part of society and family life".

"We just want to get that diversity and passion across, so that the people, particularly non-Malaysians, are attracted to Malaysian food and the country," he said.

He said there was huge potential in Malaysian cuisine, which drew its influence from Indian, Chinese, Thai, nyonya and Arab Muslim culture.

"Malaysian food could be the next big thing in Britain," he said, referring to recent reports on the British culinary scene.

Spracklen, who has visited Malaysia three times, said he had known Norman as a multi-talented person for nearly four years.

"We had talked about setting up a restaurant so often that we finally decided to go for it," he recalled.

He said they wanted to take Ning to a different level, and fuse the best of Western quality and presentation style with authentic home-cooking.

"We're pitching to local urbanites – young, professional and adventurous people – and not just the Malaysian community but also Westerners."

Over the next year, they plan to further develop their catering and events businesses, as well as expand their repertoire in terms of cuisine.

So, the next time you're craving for fresh, halal and MSG-free Malaysian food in Manchester, look no further – Ning's right in the city centre.

- *Ning Canteen, Café & Restaurant is located at The Burton Building, 92-94, Oldham Street, Northern Quarter, Manchester M4 1LJ, England (0161-238 9088 / ningcatering.com).*