

A LIFE REMEMBERED: The Big Rajah of Indian cooking

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THE Big Rajah Food Caterers that is synonymous with fine Indian cuisine, served in some of the most elegant cheffing trays found only in the elite parts of India, rose from humble beginnings to be crowned one of Malaysia's most outstanding catering houses.

The Big Rajah's phenomenal rise was due to its master chef and founding father, John Joseph Xavier.

Though the kitchens of the Big Rajah served only delectable food of exacting standards, Xavier's initial meals were simple.

The whole experience, he later told his family, was "an opening up of the soul and spirit for me". Until that defining moment, Xavier knew little about cooking as a whole and almost single-handedly he was to change all that.

Under his thrilling and exuberant guidance, Malaysians came to embrace some of the best cooking of Indian origin.

Still nothing in his background made him a gourmet chef. He ate moderately as a child, but so did his large family of 12 siblings, the children of Savrimuthu, the caretaker of St Anthony's Church at Jalan Pudu where the family lived within the church premises.

They were not a rich family and the food served at the dinner table was not of any high quality either.

Born the youngest of the family in Kuala Lumpur on May 15, 1929, Xavier left St John's Institution and the Loyola Institution with a Standard Eight Certificate to begin work as a clerk with Film Negara Malaysia.



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BIRTHDAY BOY: Xavier celebrating his 80th Birthday with family and friends. Standing back row (from left); Sarah, Christina, Jacinta, Vivian, Vannita, John and Sesu. Seated (from left:) Rossari, Xavier and Eliana

Hardworking Xavier rose to assistant film director before opting out for retirement at the age of 50 in 1979. He added excitement to his weekends by teaming up with a close friend to manage a catering business and that prepared him for a life in and outside the kitchen where he soon found out that cooking could be fun.

With a frying pan, a portable hotplate, an apron and a dozen eggs, he whipped up his first omelet that tasted good. From then on, dishes were tasted liberally and fingers licked, but the road was long and hard, working day and night from the small backyard of a Jalan Ang Seng home in Brickfields.

Here together with three friends, he started a company called the Little Caterers. Behind the hard work, he was a stickler for good food.

Indian cooking, he believed, was about rules and it was as much a science as art. With a modest full-time staff of eight, he ran the business for some 15 years before selling his shares and re-starting the kitchen under the name of Big Caterers.

In growing popularity and tastier food, Malaysians of all races began to share his great joy of shopping and eating that they are known to do so well. There was no stopping Xavier from then on.

Big Caterers catered for 10 years, feeding kings, queens, ministers, VIPs and the uncommon commoners with the best of not only Indian cooking but also the finest of Malay and Chinese cuisine. He soon sold Big Caterers, that gave way to the Big Rajah Food Caterers, maintaining the finest tradition of wining and dining.

At the Big Rajah, Xavier took the company to a higher level by introducing canopies and marquees of style and grandeur for rent. He made the Big Rajah a specialist in garden weddings, often incorporating event management with thematic settings and decorations to make an outstanding event.

With advancing age, Xavier began to slowdown, opting to oversee operations in an advisory and supporting role while leaving the business to his only son John William.

Xavier was presented the "Founding Father Award" of the Indian Catering Industry on Dec 17, 2003 by Datuk S. Subramaniam. John Joseph Xavier died at Kampung Tunku, Petaling Jaya on June 23, aged 80. He is survived by his wife of 54 years, Rossari Xavier, their three daughters Jacinta, Patricia, Vannita and seven grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held for him at the Assumption Church in Petaling Jaya, at 6pm today, followed by a reception at his residence.

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