

A look at airasia's Santan Restaurant: Tony Fernandes' childhood dream

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The reporter with Mok Tek Shern, right, Santan Product Innovation

Most entrepreneurs have a story about childhood dreams that often get side-lined in the whirlwinds that carry them forward in directions they could not have imagined.

Curiously, at least from my perspective, running a restaurant, café or bar is often on that list. Having opened and run countless such operations both for myself and for my clients over the years and know just how hard that can be, I often wonder what the attraction is. And yet, opening a restaurant still ranks as one of the most popular Things-I-Want-To-Do.

[AirAsia](#)'s CEO Tony Fernandes shares the dream as well. Having a restaurant was something he always wanted to do - but how do you fit that into your role in running an airline? Well, strange as it may seem, the answer for him was to open restaurants with offerings modeled on dishes similar to what passengers might find onboard, with a focus on some of the most popular passenger choices. Clearly not fazed by the traditional bad press that, despite all our best efforts, airline food can suffer, Tony started airasia's Santan Café and Restaurant brand with its direct links to AirAsia as the pull.

To find out exactly how this is going, I met with Vichitra Nades, of AirAsia Communications and Mok Tek Shern, Santan Product Innovation, at a couple of the outlets to find out more.

Vichitra explained to me that, “Santan is synonymous with the AirAsia name and with our main base in Kuala Lumpur, we're the world's first restaurant brand to serve a beloved Malaysian dish - the classic Nasi Lemak, both inflight and on the ground.”



Eco-friendly cardboard packaging that stores easily and ergonomically in the galley

Loyal passengers have their favorites, she says, adding, “In the last 20 years, we’ve built a steady fan base with our classic local dishes like Pak Nasser’s Nasi Lemak and Uncle Chin’s Chicken Rice. Many of Santan restaurant visitors tell us that our in-flight meals were a key reason they chose to fly with AirAsia, and are thrilled that we’ve now opened up outlets for a great value, fast food dining experience.”

The popularity of Santan dishes is clear. Nasi Lemak - a traditional Malaysian rice-based dish cooked in fragrant coconut milk infused with herbs and spices, served with sambal, and a dried fish and peanuts garnish - has earned itself legendary status among AirAsia passengers so this was obviously going to be the core product for the café/restaurants.

With nine restaurants and three cafe outlets currently (and more than 80 planned for the Kuala Lumpur area), the project is still in its early development.

When it launched, the restaurant’s first challenge was the pandemic.

“As dining in was prohibited for close to two years, we jumped on the food delivery bandwagon which was seeing a huge surge at the time. Santan meals were sold on our airasia Super App and other platforms, and fans of our popular dishes became our loyal customers there,” Vichitra says.

“In 2021, airasia ride was launched, further strengthening our offerings as a one-stop platform and

this allowed us to reach more customers, with better promotions and deals.”

There are plans to extend the concept nationally and then regionally.

The original was built around the food delivery platform but now 70 percent of the product is consumed as dine-in.

The latest manifestation of the core product, dubbed ‘Nasi Lemak On-The-Go’ features packaging that is designed for use onboard the aircraft, as takeaway or delivery, and as dine-in. Clever, eco-friendly cardboard packaging that stores easily and ergonomically in the galley with an easy-to-use function and the ability to open up and stand on a table, removing the need for plates or baskets.

Referring back to the inflight service, Vichitra says, “We’re always striving to better ourselves in every way and ensuring our customers enjoy the best quality of food at an inexpensive price. Our Nasi Lemak has sold over 20 million packets and counting and the team still works on improvements to the recipe, and packaging. Our Santan R&D team is working on innovating and curating current menus whilst looking into new variations. AirAsia will always be a ‘no-frills’ brand but that said, Santan offerings won’t compromise on taste and quality. Low cost with AirAsia doesn’t mean low service.”



Nasi is a traditional Malaysian rice-based dish cooked in fragrant coconut milk infused with herbs and spices

Mok Tek Shern, Santan's Innovation boss who is responsible for the dishes, reiterated the challenges. When asked specifically about the limited range available for pre-purchase on AirAsia, he says, "I have to balance popularity with variety and all at the lowest possible cost. We found the take-up rate did not change with a wider choice range so we keep it to the favorites and rotate them, with occasional new products in the mix."

Mok's challenges, like most in the airline catering sector, center around the value proposition and convincing operators that the cost of providing good food and service delivers multiple returns. The problem is always that this return is not direct, it is earned over time. I do not believe Emirates expects to see a \$2 billion immediate return on its recently announced F&B improvements program, but the long-term benefits are clear.



Pak Nasser's Nasi Lemak Ice Cream

For Mok, it is compounded by the need to keep the booking process quick and simple. The current meal choice range on AirAsia is limited, but the most popular dishes are also available at the outlets - which in turn feature a wider range of choices such as the 'Nasi Lemak On-The-Go' and most recently, 'Pak Nasser's Nasi Lemak Ice Cream'. It is very rare, and an example of Fernandes' entrepreneurial mind, for an airline to build its own "brand" around its food options. The airasia Santan Restaurant as a brand is of importance to the airline which keeps the simplicity of its offerings as a running theme. 4

“For now, our cafes are styled in a simplistic and comforting design. When our patrons visit us, be it in a Santan Restaurant or Cafe, we want them to feel at home, and we want our food to be the main highlight. In the future, as we slowly expand internationally, the team will look into how we can customize our designs to suit the local culture.”