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Singh sinks teeth into Pudgie's reemergence in NY

By Martin Desmarais

EAST ISLIP, N.Y. — The franchise industry has a lot of options for all those entering — some want to go with traditional brands that bring an expected level of success, some want to go with new concepts hoping to be part of the next big thing. For Aman Singh, Pudgie's Famous Chicken offered him the chance to be part of the revival of a brand.

Pudgie's was started in 1981 in Long Island and grew to close to 40 stores in the region, but the concept faded over the last several decades. However, new ownership now has the brand on an expansion strategy.

Singh, 31, is front and center in this expansion as he is the first development agent for Pudgie's and also owner of three of the chain's six locations. He has committed to developing 15 more stores on Long Island, looking to help bring the brand back to the prominence it once had enjoyed in the New York region.

A native of Punjab, Singh came to the United States with his family in 1997 and settled in Long Island. He attended The State University of New York at Stony Brook and graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science and business in 2002. He then took a job as a technical analyst with Citigroup Inc.

However, he said that it wasn't long before he began to pursue his own venture. "I always had that thing in me that I wanted to own my own business," he said.

He was familiar with Pudgie's as a customer and often ate lunch at a store in East Islip, which was near where his wife worked. "I loved the food and I loved the product," Singh said. "My wife used to eat the food for lunch everyday and one day she said, 'Why don't you own a Pudgie's?'"



Photo courtesy of Pudgie's Famous Chicken

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Singh's first Pudgie's store was actually the East Islip location that he ate at with his wife. He approached the owner about buying the location and it turned out the owner — who had operated the restaurant for 15 years — was interested in retiring, so they worked out a deal.

Singh bought the Pudgie's location in October 2005. "It is all destiny," Singh said about how easily his entrance into the chain worked out.

He remained at Citigroup for about six months after entering the franchise business, but then left to pursue it full time. Once he got rolling in the franchise business, there was no other gear for Singh than full steam ahead. He bought a second store in Shirley in Oct 2007 and a third in West Islip in February 2010.

"In business you can know in a month if you made the right decision or not and if you make the right decision you might as well go ahead with it," said Singh.



Pudgie's Famous Chicken looks to return to its heyday when the chain had 40 locations on Long Island. Photo courtesy of Pudgie's Famous Chicken

Singh is also in the middle of developing another store in Holbrook. He is building his fourth Pudgie's from scratch, unlike his prior three, which were existing stores that he bought from the owners.

"I always believed in the brand and I wanted to expand with them. That is why I wanted to make this my career," said Singh.

Pudgie's signature product is bone-in, skinless fried chicken. The brand's process of preparing chicken includes removing the skin and breading the product by hand. The chain said that by eliminating the skin it is able to address consumer's desire for a healthier fried chicken option because its skinless chicken is 25 percent lower in fat and cholesterol than traditional fried chicken. The menus also features chicken wings, salads, sandwich wraps, fries and baked potatoes, biscuits, chicken pot pies, hushpuppies and a variety of other side dishes.

In 2007, New York-based Trufoods LLC bought the Pudgie's Famous Chicken brand. The company also owns several other brands, including Wall Street Deli, Ritter's Frozen Custard and Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips. Trufoods brands have approximately 100 locations in the United States with annual system-wide sales of about \$40 million. The company said its goal is to grow its brands by doubling or tripling over the next five years with an emphasis on growth in existing markets and utilizing area developers and single-unit operators.

According to Singh, he approached Trufoods about being a development agent for Pudgie's and the company was quick to give him the ok. "I just wanted to take my business to the next level," Singh said. "It is a business proposition. It is very profitable."

Singh said he is already working with others for about half a dozen of the 15 stores he has committed to helping develop. According to him, there has been a lot of interest. His plan is to target locations were Pudgie's used to be. "The demand is still there," he said. "People miss it."

He has a lot of confidence in Pudgie's and high hopes for Trufoods' guidance of the chain. "I see the brand being successful," he said. "Fast food is the future of America I believe."

"I think that people might not be going into the restaurant right now. They are going into small, family-owned places. They want to get their food and take it home," he added. "I think this economy is good for fast food."

Gary Occhiogrosso, Trufoods' chief development officer, said that Singh is the perfect person to lead Pudgie's renewed franchise efforts in the area where it was once wide spread since he was actually one of the few remaining owners of the concept before Trufoods bought the chain.

"Aman has been a Pudgie's operator longer than us," Occhiogrosso said. "He knows what it was like before and after [Trufoods bought Pudgie's] • He is so excited about the brand.

"We have a great relationship with him," he added. "We are proud of his successes and what he is doing with the brand."

In addition to Singh's pledge to help develop 15 stores, Occhiogrosso said Trufoods plans to open a corporate store in New Jersey and to continue to expand into other markets such as Boston, Washington and Atlanta.

According to Occhiogrosso, Trufoods really started to focus on expanding Pudgie's last year. "The underlying motivation to re-launch the concept came from consumers," he said. "We recognize the fact that from the store value point of view, from a consumer point of view, the concept still had great brand recognition and name recognition.

"We are very excited about it. Truefoods really understands the value of the concept based on our research and what we heard back," he added.

Since the brand was re-launched, Occhiogrosso said their have been many inquires, often from franchisees who own other brands that are over-saturated and don't offer much room for expansion.

"Franchisees in the New York area, once they heard, the calls came pouring in," said Occhiogrosso. "Our phones are ringing because people are aware of the comeback."