

Of noodles and a proud family legacy – Mee Rebus Haji Wahid continues the proud tradition!

By Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal - April 18, 2021 @ 9:01am



ALWAYS work hard Shafiq. Because nobody's going to do it for you," the old man says to his grandson, his voice earnest. His cucu (grandson) merely nods in response, his little hand clutching his grandfather's wizened fingers tightly as they make their way slowly across the road, headed for the mosque.

Soon, the sound of the *azan* (call to prayer) permeates the air, putting a halt to any more talk between grandson and his grandfather. Together, they walk solemnly into the prayer hall, joining the rest of the congregation, ready to face their Maker.

"My grandfather was always telling us to keep striving and work hard," confides MohdShafiqYusrihafizi, his soft chuckles tearing me away from the "film reel" of images that had unfurled in my head the moment the proprietor of Mee Rebus Haji Wahid started taking me down memory lane, to a time when he was a young boy in awe of his formidable grandfather, the late Haji Wahid, of Johor's Haji Wahid Mee Rebus fame.



Haji Wahid Mee Rebus outlet shares its space with three other vendors under one roof.

The affable 31-year-old is only a month into his business here at Shaftsbury Putrajaya Mall in Presint 1, his "outlet" occupying the front half of a cafe that also houses three other vendors, with the main tenant being Min Coffee. This outlet is Shafiq's third — the others being in Aeon Mall, Puchong and one in Shah Alam.



Haji Wahid and wife, Hajjah Hendon, in a pose circa 1946.

Continuing with his story, the Johorean proudly shares that his late grandfather was very passionate about the business which he'd inherited from his own father, the late WakBaidali, back in 1938. "His life was truly centred on his business. Even during festive periods, he'd be selling his mee rebus. Fortunately, my grandmother, a housewife, was fully supportive of her husband's passion."

The eldest of four siblings, Shafiq, who later went on to boarding school in Penawar, remembers spending his early years with his grandparents who lived in Tebrau, Johor. His mother would make it a point to visit her parents every week, taking her excited young son with her.

"By then, Bak (the name given to his grandfather) had already retired from the business so he had ample time to hang with his cucu. We'd go to the mosque together and of course, spend time around the house,"

recalls Shafiq, his eyes misting at the memory.

Continuing, the fourth generation from the huge Baidali clan adds: "My grandfather was a strict man, bold and serious too. He was a stickler for religion and being on time. His biggest advice, which continues to ring to this day is the value of working hard."

Suffice it to say, that's EXACTLY what he's doing today.

WIND OF CHANGE

"A lot of people have asked why I ventured into this business during such challenging times," muses the father-of-one. Noting the bob of my head, he continues: "I say, 'what do I have to lose?' After all, I hadn't been working and my savings were slowly depleting."

Rolling back the time, Shafiq, who studied engineering at the Malaysia-France Institute in Bangi, Selangor, was an oil and gas engineer for five years. But then the pandemic hit and he found himself unable to travel and having to grapple with declining number of projects coming his way.

"I found myself unemployed for five months," he confides softly, before sharing: "This was when I knew I had to contemplate a new career path. I started thinking about what business I could go into."

He admits that it hadn't actually crossed his mind to venture into the family business. "I knew that to dive into a business such as this would entail lots of sacrifice and time. I wasn't sure whether that was something I'd be prepared for," he concedes, expression earnest.

That aside, Shafiq shares that he'd had some experience — and insight — into what life in the family business could be like having spent some parts of his childhood helping out his uncles and aunties at their stalls.

Smiling, he recalls: "I used to help wipe plates, prepare the ingredients, the crispy crackles and gravy. I even learnt the special way of packing the gravy. There was just so much to do because our *mee rebus* was very popular and there'd always be a steady stream of customers."



Today, he sheepishly admits that every spare minute of his time is spent here at his outlet. "Sometimes I feel like a one-man show but it has to be done. Now I know why my grandfather did what he did," exclaims Shafiq, grinning broadly.

Adding, he confesses: "Even at night I sometimes find myself having to cook and of course, prepare for the next day. In fact, before you came, I was busy packing our pastes. Thankfully, I have my staff from my other outlets to help cover here. And fortunately, I have a supportive wife who's very understanding."



Why did you change your mind about entering the family business, I couldn't help blurting out in between mouthfuls of a delicious bowl of Mee Rebus Gearbox that had magically appeared on the table just moments earlier.

A pause ensues as the soft-spoken Cancerian observes my enjoyment of his star offering with mirth. "Use the straw to slurp the marrow out!" he coaxes, before chuckling uproariously at my look of feigned horror.

"Ok, where were we?" Shafiq continues, returning to my question. "Oh yes, why I changed my mind. Well, this is a wonderful family business with a long tradition. In the Klang Valley, there's very few Mee Rebus Haji Wahid outlets. There's one in a food court in Presint 9 run by my cousin, and another in Plaza Damas, which an uncle operates. There's also another one inside Aeon Mall in Nilai and one in Shah Alam. I want to see more!" exclaims Shafiq, eyes twinkling.

The bulk of the initial capital for his present outlet came from his father, who's also in the oil and gas industry. "Thankfully, I had some help," he admits, before adding that money for renovation works on the space came out from his own pocket. His father, adds Shafiq, was the one who persuaded him to take up this shared space in Shaftsbury Putrajaya.

"Actually, it's not a bad thing to be sharing a space," he points out, adding that they get to share the burden of the rent, which isn't cheap. "What's more, our respective businesses actually complement each other. Those who want to eat can choose from my selection of mee rebus and another food vendor, while those who want coffee or ice-cream can still do so as everything is under the same roof. There's a good synergy here."

The most popular item in this outlet is the Mee Rebus Daging, which I've had the pleasure of savouring prior to this visit. The meat, so tender and fresh, goes really well with the flavourful gravy, which is heavier and nuttier in taste and has a distinctive aroma of ground dried shrimps.

"My favourite item is the original Mee Rebus," confides Shafiq before sharing that he's not into fancy "add-ons" as he was raised eating the original version of the mee rebus, which comprised yellow noodles, thick gravy, crispy crackles, leaves and chillies.

Elaborates Shafiq, the eldest of four siblings: "There's no meat or anything in the original version. I remember tucking into a bowl of this delicious dish with my grandfather. I loved watching him eat. He used to eat the noodles with his hand and sometimes have it as a side dish to go with his rice. Something like the Javanese-style NasiAmbeng."



Chuckling softly at the memory, he tells me that one can never go wrong with the food business. Especially during times like this. "Everyone needs to eat," he says, matter-of-factly, before adding sheepishly: "I just have to work on having a better marketing strategy for my business. But it's tough because I've been pretty much a one-man show on that front. But I'll get there!"

RISING TO THE OCCASION

Another big challenge he faces is related to manpower. Grimacing, Shafiq confides that handling staff can be a big headache at times. "I question their commitment and resilience sometimes. Some are not serious about the job and can't handle hard work. It's not easy to find workers with a good attitude. The other challenge is, of course, the volume of traffic, which has been affected by the pandemic."

Smiling wryly, he shares that there's no such thing as a holiday these days. "The shop must open every day. If I close, I'll not have income for that day. It's not like being a salaried staff so I need to plough on," admits Shafiq, his tone weary.

Continuing, he says: "Now that I'm doing the business, I know I need to throw all my energy and time into it. I have to come to terms with the challenges and rise to the occasion. Last time I just used to observe from behind, watching my uncles and aunties do the business. Now it's my turn!"

He certainly has to rise to the occasion if he wants to realise his big dream — to be the next PappaRich or Old Town chain. "Yeah, I want to be as successful as that chain — but Malay style," confides Shafiq, eyes dancing under his glasses.

Adding, He says: "In Malaysia, we don't have enough *kopitiam* owned by Malays — in the big chain mould, I mean. My dream is to have a Haji Wahid *kopitiam* outlet in every part of the country. Maybe on my menu I'll have *mee rebus*, good coffee and some rice dishes and western food!"

Moving forward, Shafiq, previously an avid rugby and cricket player in his younger days, plans to look further into the "aesthetics" — like plating and presentation of his dishes. "These days, with social media being so big, the camera eats first so we understand things need to look nice. We can't be using simple plastic plates anymore," he concedes, sagely.

Brows furrowing, the Johorean adds: "If we want to be the next PappaRich, we have to ensure our dishes are well presented and marketing has to be strong. Of course, it's about the capital too so that's something I have to look into. Another thing I'm planning is to add more premium toppings like lobster, ribs, marrow etc."

CHANGING TIMES



The Baidali clan in Johor.

The bubbly young man firmly believes that Haji Wahid's legacy can grow from strength to strength. After all, they have many loyal customers. But is it a pressure to continue the legacy? I couldn't help asking.

Chuckling, Shafiq replies: "I get really nervous when Johoreans come here and declare that their bowl of noodles doesn't taste the same as what they've had before!" Of course it can never be the same, he points out.

"They don't realise that steps and processes have to be modified to meet changing demands and landscape," he explains, adding: "I can't follow strictly the way things were done in the past. I have many stalls to oversee and I need to get things done in an efficient manner. In the past, everything was very precise but slower. I used to follow one of my uncles and saw how he did things — one by one he'd cook. This isn't a sustainable way to operate today."



The gravy is super flavourful.

Despite the challenges, Shafiq is resolute in his resolve to continue Haji Wahid's proud legacy. "And I want to do it well," he says simply, adding: "Whatever we're doing here, we're carrying the family's proud name. We have to take full control of the business. There's no such thing as simply passing it on to others to do the business just because things get tough."

Asked what drives him, Shafiq's quick to reply: "I motivate myself by acknowledging that there are others in worse situations out there. Especially during this pandemic. Some people have no roof over their head; some have no food to eat. I have nothing to lose. I have a family — a wife and a baby — to support. I need to make this work!"

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

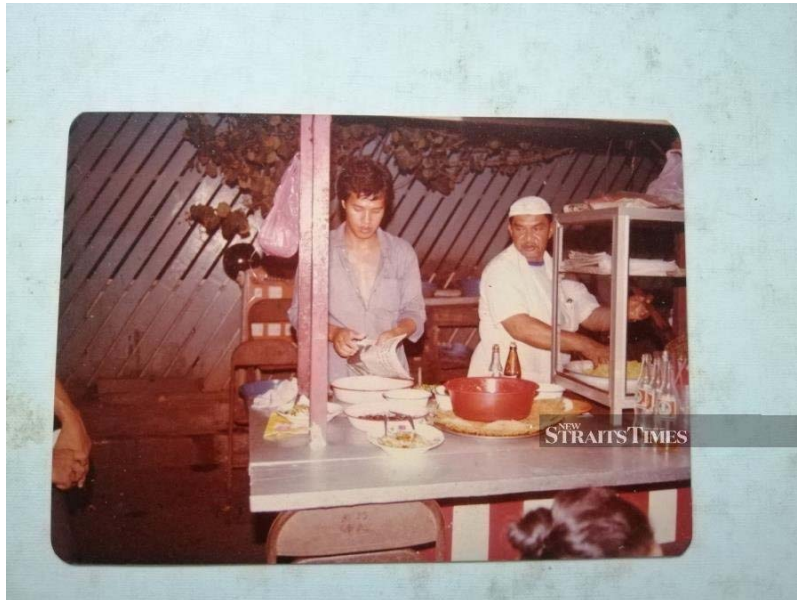


Portrait of Ali bin Karam Ali, Haji Wahid's father.

The story of Johor's famous Mee Rebus Haji Wahid began in 1918. It was then the business of one WakBaidali, father of Haji Wahid and Shafiq's great grandfather. "WakBaidali began this Mee Rebus business just from a kandar (a wooden driver placed on the shoulder to carry goods). A bowl used to cost

5 sen then," recalls Shafiq, brows furrowing as he attempts to recollect from stories told to him by his aunts and uncles.

He then passed the business to his eldest son, Shafiq's grandfather in 1938, who, by the time he took over, was operating his mee rebus business from a trishaw. On his menu then was the original Mee Rebus, comprising yellow noodles, bean sprouts, crispy fried crackles made from wheat flour mixed with spices, and chilies.



Shafiq's late grandfather seen here at his Mee Rebus stall.

"After the trishaw, my grandfather opened a stall at a *pasarmakan* (food court) in Johor Bahru," continues Shafiq. Back then, it was just an open space with very limited seating. People came, ate and left to make way for the next customer. The business, says Shafiq, did well albeit with the occasional ups and downs.

Most of his grandfather's children — there are 12 altogether, comprising four daughters and eight sons — are doing this business today. Only four (from the 12) are not, including Shafiq's own mother, the youngest of all Haji Wahid's children.

"My grandfather had more than 40 grandchildren," declares Shafiq, pride lacing his voice. "I'm among the last. Some of my uncles who are doing this have been using our great grandfather's name for their business, calling their outlets Mee Rebus Haji Wahid Baidali. Mine is just Mee Rebus Haji Wahid simply because the name Baidali isn't so recognisable with a lot of people."

His eyes misting again, Shafiq confides there are times he truly misses his grandfather. Softly, he shares: "When Bak was still alive, the family was a lot more close-knit and we used to enjoy so many family gatherings. Normally a week before Hari Raya, we'd have a small gathering at my grandparent's house and everyone would come. The house would be full."

Smiling wistfully at the recollection, the former engineer remembers: "It was common practice for my grandfather to fast on the second day of Hari Raya — the puasaenam — and after that, by the seventh day of Syawal, we'd celebrate. It was always a merry occasion and my uncles would

be called upon to do all the preparations while my grandfather oversaw everything. The feasts were certainly memorable!"



Catering for the Johor palace. This picture was taken circa 1970s.

There's not so much of that these days, he confides with a small shrug. "I do miss it but life goes on. This Ramadan, I know that most of my uncles will be involved in the Bazaar Ramadan in their respective locales. Even my cousins will be doing something in Putrajaya."



The secret behind a great bowl is the gravy and crispy fried crackles.

What about him, I ask. He smiles and eagerly informs me that he too will be promoting Haji Wahid's famous mee rebus by being a part of a buffet line being offered here at Shaftsbury Putrajaya Mall. "I'm joining forces with another cafe in this mall that's doing a buffet promotion. They're offering western and Asian fusion, and I'll present my mee rebus at my small counter out there. There'll also be a buffet line of fresh mee rebus at the food court."

The threat of darkening clouds outside prompts me to conclude my chat with this pleasant young proprietor. Any last words, I ask him, taking a final stab into my already cold noodles. I note the deep pursing of his lips as he once again reflects on my question.

Finally, voice low, Haji Wahid's youngest grandson replies: "Mee Rebus Haji Wahid is a heritage — not only a Johor heritage but very much a Malaysian heritage. I just want to preserve our heritage food. I want the younger generation to know about mee rebus, not just pasta. I need to reintroduce it to the new generation. Taktahumakatak cinta (If you don't know, you don't love)."

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MEE REBUS HAJI WAHID

(Dine In, Take-Away and Delivery)

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