

# Fast Bites

## RAMMY Winner!

**W**hen Mike Daryoush came to the United States from Iran in 1975, his intent was to get his electrical engineering degree from George Washington University. He did that, but the whole time, he wondered what he was doing. It turned out that his real dream was, you guessed it, to start a restaurant!

Daryoush's first foray into restaurant entrepreneurship was in 1987, when he bought a Bethesda diner that served traditional American breakfasts and lunches. When it did not achieve the success he had hoped, Daryoush turned to his Persian roots, adding a traditional clay oven to bake fresh pita bread, ground kabob meats, and authentic Mediterranean spices and flavors. In 1989, he reopened as the Moby Dick House of Kabob. "He named his restaurant after a very famous restaurant in Iran with the same name," notes Alex Momeni, Moby Dick's chief development officer. "He had fond memories of that from his earlier days."

### At the beginning...

...Daryoush bunked in the restaurant, cooked, and basically worked from morning until night to keep the fledgling eatery going. "If you are not getting dirty at the end of the day," he is quoted as saying, "you haven't worked!" Daryoush saw his customer base start to grow as people tried — and liked — the tasty Persian-themed food offerings. Today, almost 30 years later, his American dream has grown into a Mid-Atlantic restaurant success.

Moby Dick House of Kabob restaurants now dot the regional landscape, from northern Virginia to D.C. to Maryland. This past November, the twenty-third restaurant opened in Baltimore, "with potential new store locations being explored in Columbia, Pikesville, and more," says Momeni.



VP Ned Daryoush (l) and Chief Development Office Alex Momeni celebrate their Fast Bites RAMMY win

credit: Mehdi Bemani

Much of the day-to-day running of the chain is handled by Momeni and Ned Daryoush, Moby Dick vice president and Mike's eldest son. But it's a generational transition that will go slowly," says Momeni. "It's his family legacy, which he is turning over to Ned to take to the next level."

### The Hyattsville commissary

Momeni says one thing that will never change is the focus on authenticity and quality that Mike Daryoush has demanded from the beginning. At a central, 18,000-square-foot "commissary" in Hyattsville, the kabob meats are marinated, the hummus is mixed, and the appetizers are prepared and assembled. From there, drivers transport the foods to each restaurant site, where the kabobs are cooked over open flame.

"It has been the concept for many years," says Momeni. "Everything gets prepared there. We are adding a docking station and an extension to grow it to 25,000 square feet, with the capacity to support 50 stores."

### The other thing that sets Moby Dick's apart is...

...Mike Daryoush himself. "He's so humble about his success. He would take the shirt off his back for any of

his employees. Because of him, it's a team effort, it truly is," Momeni says. "It's not a one- or two-man show. It's a 400-person show. Everyone is doing his or her part. We have each others' backs each and every day."

The focus on employees has had many benefits, including staff longevity. "Mike's first ever employee is still working for us. A lot of the employees have been here 15 to 20 years and even more," Momeni says. "It's a family friendly environment where people know if they stay, they will be rewarded." Benefits include paid time off, health insurance for full-time employees, and even free Moby Dick lunches. Momeni quotes Mike Daryoush's philosophy this way: "You cannot spend enough time on your employees. It doesn't make sense to lose them. It takes too much time to replace and retrain people."

### To continue its training efforts...

...the firm is building a platform for "Moby Dick University," with a launch goal of late 2018. The site will include video training, a library of reading materials, welcome packages for new employees, an intranet where employees can speak with each other, and continuing ed training modules designed for employees as they grow with the firm.

### So who eats at Moby Dick House of Kabob?

It turns out a lot of people! "Because we are fast casual, we appeal to a lot of younger families, educated with one to two kids, working families, young couples, newlyweds who want something good and tasty but relatively fast," Momeni reflects. In the firm's older locations, the demographics trend older because people have been coming in for a long time. "We even have grandparents who have come in for years now coming in with their grandkids!" he exclaims. About sixty percent of Moby Dick customers buy meals to take out, with forty percent eating in, selecting from a menu of such popular items as kabobs, rice, gyros, falafel, salads, and baklava.

### Moving into the future

"Our major competitors are not just other kabob locations," Momeni says, but "anyone who takes a slice of the market share." To compete, the chain is offering delivery service from all locations — but with a twist. Customers can order directly through Moby Dick or via DoorDash, an on-demand restaurant delivery service.

Another growing part of the business is catering. "Catering is one of our biggest areas of focus right now," says Momeni. "Every time we feed 50 customers through catering, we gain 20 to 30 new regular customers." That part of the business is currently slightly under 20 percent, "but we hope to grow it to 30 percent!"

Growth is definitely in the plans for this newly minted RAMMY winner. With the highest number of votes from the public in the Favorite Fast Bites category, Moby Dick House of Kabob shows it has a fan base willing to express its support. For Mike Daryoush, the unassuming restaurateur who has put his heart and soul into the business for almost three decades, that kind of recognition has to be the best reward of all.