

Captain Spice

Despite building a £50 million empire, the chairman of Patak's Foods will not rest until his products are sold in every corner of the world.

Neil Bromage discovers what drives him

According to his family, Kirit Pathak bears more than a passing resemblance to the captain of the *Starship Enterprise*, Jean-Luc Picard. But having recently opened what is thought to be the largest Indian food factory in the world, a better title might be Captain Spice.

For the moment, his travels as chairman and chief executive of Patak's Foods are limited to this world – and the whole of it, not just an area north of Watford. "I want to put Patak's into every stomach I can find to take it," Pathak says with a touch of humour. And he means it: Patak's is one of the fastest-growing brands in the UK. Its products are available in more than 40 countries and it is an established brand leader in Australia.

To produce the company's extensive range, which includes pastes, chutneys, pickles, sauces and pappadums, Pathak has to source about 2,700 tonnes of spices a year, and other produce from around the world. "Quality is paramount. I have to go all around the world to get what we need and, while I can look into things like temperate zones and climates before travelling, it's not until I actually get there that I can really assess the quality of the product. For example, out of about 1,000 varieties of mango, only about 10 are suitable for our pickles."

According to Pathak, many of the raw materials that Patak's uses are not "common or usual", and it has taken many years for the company to build up the necessary relationships with suppliers around the globe. "I spend a lot of time educating farmers and producers about our needs. We have to make sure that every supplier fully understands ▶



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our specifications, especially with the exacting standards we have in the UK. Many developing countries simply don't understand those requirements and standards and often, as soon as your back is turned, they will be back to their old habits."

Currying favour

To overcome these problems, Patak's often takes a long-term view, investing in the supplier's business and helping it to improve. "The closer you can get to the farmer, cutting out all the middlemen, the better. It's all about relationships and having a very long-term supply chain vision for your business," Pathak says.

Whether Pathak had such a vision for the business when he joined his father at the company in 1970, we don't know. In those days, he mixed the spices and pastes by hand, filled 300 jars a day with a funnel and teaspoon and delivered to shops in London and Birmingham in his Austin Mini Estate.

Since then the curry factor has kicked in, and there are now more than 10,000 Indian restaurants in the UK (Patak's supplies 90 per cent of them). A Gallup poll in 1997 showed that curry had become the nation's favourite food.

With all this in mind, and considering that Patak's uses 60,000 tonnes of water, five million kWhs of electricity and 14 million kWhs of gas to manufacture its products, it's perhaps unsurprising that Cherie Booth, wife of Tony Blair, the UK prime minister, was prepared officially to open its new £18 million factory at Leigh in Lancashire.

The new factory has been built on the site of the Old Parsonage Colliery in what was once a mining area. Locals now suggest that

the pungent smells wafting from the factory doors have become as much a feature of the local and national culture as pits once were. It's the company's fifth site, producing the frozen foods, breads, sauces and pickles that make up Patak's Foods' £50 million turnover.

But ask Captain Spice how he views this success and the response is a bit surprising. "I don't think I'm successful enough. Who measures that? I don't. Perhaps I'm not so successful, perhaps I've wasted the past 20 years." He is an enigma – a gentle, courteous man

who puts everyone he meets at ease. He knows most of his staff, now numbering about 650, by name, and listens to them a lot. "By listening to everyone, the entire company's force will be behind the ultimate decisions," Pathak says.

The "forces" that seem to drive Kirit Pathak are rooted in his truly multicultural background. His personal trek began in 1952 in Kisumu, Kenya, born to Indian parents who moved to Britain soon after. Once there, he was sent to Ireland to be educated by Catholics. All this, he says, has helped him. "I'm very religious – Hindu, though officially Roman Catholic, and I've taken the best of both. I believe God provides for us. He's there to guide us, and he does, but I leave the rewards to him."

The rewards for Pathak have been warp-speed growth during the 1990s, an OBE in 1996 (followed by one for his wife and co-director Meena in November 2001), and swapping the Mini for a Mercedes. But Pathak is not yet 50, and there's a feeling he still has much to do.

"As a branded and finished-goods player, we, along with everyone else, are always trying to take costs out of the supply and distribution chain. I believe we have now reached the bottom of the barrel and everyone has a part to play in recognising the real cost of things," Pathak says.

"Supermarkets can't continue to expect everyone else to make changes to make their lives easier. Manufacturing in this country is now in a serious position. We have the best and most diligent food manufacturing in the world, but outside agencies are imposing things that are unfair compared with other countries, particularly when the controls we have are so much higher and the standards elsewhere so much lower," he says.

He remains philosophical about the firm's success when so many others have failed: "It's never a single thing. Whatever you do, do it well first time. Being ahead of and creating the market is important, few companies have that. They can steal but not create."

But what else has helped to launch Pathak to the heights of corporate stardom? "I've added vision to the hard work. I've always set myself very high standards and what some people consider to be impossible targets. With that little bit of extra effort the vision becomes more achievable," he says.

Building a £50 million empire would be enough for most of us, but the Pathak enigma pervades. "I see myself surviving in a little Indian food factory, forging relationships around the world to achieve my goal of seeing Patak's in every single country on every single shelf in some form or another."

Kirit Pathak OBE

Chairman and chief executive, Patak's Foods, aged 49

- 1956 Moved to England
- 1959 St Dominic's Convent Junior School, Dublin
- 1970 Left Coventry Polytechnic College after three weeks to join Patak's Foods
- 1974 Becomes chairman and chief executive of Patak's
- 1978 Moved Patak's to 48,000 sq ft site in Wigan, Lancashire
- 1990 Purchased 18,000 sq ft distribution warehouse in Haydock, Lancashire
- 1996 Awarded OBE
- 2002 Opened 164,000 sq ft factory in Leigh, Lancashire

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