



The thought factory

The leading name in the design and planning of prestigious catering projects in Switzerland, promaFox is looking to extend its unique blend of skills to more European markets. Jim Banks looks back at its 30-year journey to the top of the market with owner **Vinoo Mehera FCSI**

Outside Switzerland, promaFox may not be the most familiar name in foodservice design, but in the Swiss market it is the premier partner for innovative projects of all sizes. Whether designing a bespoke kitchen for a new restaurant or handling a range of foodservice outlets for a hotel, airport or stadium, the company is known for its tailored solutions and efficient delivery.

It is a company that has catering planning expertise at its core, and it

uses decades of experience to provide solutions that are tailored specifically to the individual needs of its clients. Over nearly 30 years, it has worked with renowned hotels, restaurants and large companies, public institutions and retail organisations across Switzerland and is now looking to spread its influence further afield.

“A lot has happened in 30 years,” says Vinoo André Mehera FCSI, owner & CEO of promaFox. “From humble beginnings, the company quickly established itself, initially outside Switzerland. In 1992, it had a small office in Russia through which it obtained a contract for seven cruise ships, then a major hotel project in Istanbul and, in 1994, the founders had to hire additional people for the first time.”

At its peak, the company employed 23 people – both general planners focused on the complete build process and gastronomy consultants. By 2009, it had



begun work not only on the foodservice elements of prestigious new projects, but also on conceptual designs and strategic planning. Having scaled back its work when founder Reto Fuchs FCSI took on a political role, the company has since embarked on renewed expansion, never having lost its place at the top of the Swiss market.

Since the day it was founded, the company has maintained a consistent set of values that define its approach to large projects. At the heart of its philosophy is a desire to ensure that every client gets a tailor-made solution. Nothing it does is generic; nothing is done by the numbers.

“The customer is at the heart of all of our activities,” says Mehera. “We cannot copy and paste between projects. Sustainability is also a key part of everything we do – it is part of our DNA. Everything we do must be sustainable, so we use locally sourced equipment and we work with partners based in Switzerland. That has always been part of the company’s approach.”

Consistent values, new vision

It was only four years ago that Mehera took over promaFox. Current senior partner Fuchs and his wife originally founded the company back in 1990.

“I stumbled upon the company because I was looking to start a new business or buy a start-up company, but through a friend I heard that Reto had a company and was looking for an exit,” Mehera remarks. “My friend thought I could be the person to take promaFox to the next level so I met with Reto. I liked the company and I knew about complex project management, among other things, and it fitted well with my skills and my love of food.”

Mehera had studied economics in India before moving to Switzerland, but he found that his qualifications were not recognised in the Swiss market. Advised to study at a local university, he eventually graduated from the hotel management school Belvoirpark in Zurich in 1986. So began his first foray into the foodservice sector.

From left to right: Swiss Re; AIR, Zurich airport; Credit Suisse Tower; Bellikon Clinic

After a stint at Mövenpick, where he became a food and beverage manager, he opened two Indian restaurants – one in Zurich and another in Basel – and joined Bindella in 1990 as the managing director of Italian restaurant chain Santa Lucia. From there, he made a radical switch to the technology sector.

Having joined Datapoint Corporation, where he became general manager for Germany and Switzerland with responsibility for sales of \$42m and 200 employees, he later moved on to executive roles at Dell Inc. then Colt Technology Services. In 2015, he decided to work for himself and the following year he bought promaFox.

“The company brings together many different facets of my experience and knowledge,” says Mehera. “Running a business is always similar regardless of the sector. There is one key difference between technology and foodservice – the foodservice sector is more dependent on people.”

“There are similarities between the two sectors in which I have worked. Both need a clear vision, sustainability, scalability and a focus on growth, people management and customer service.”

Growth has certainly been high on the agenda since Mehera became the boss. Fuchs, who is steadily stepping back from the company, now uses his extensive experience to train the in-house team, drawing on his knowledge of both customers and strategic projects to coach the people working on flagship projects. Mehera focuses on the company’s strategy, its customer relationships and project management.

“When I took over, the company had only six employees; now we have 16 people in the team,” says Mehera. “The company has always adapted. Reto has always known how to enhance the business. The main focus is on gastronomy – the planning of the kitchen – but we have built up the general project planning capability again, so we balance foodservice design with interior design and conceptual work on the look and feel of a new project.

“Our vision is to be the leading think tank for gastronomy planning,” he adds. “Our offices are like a workshop and we aim to be what might be called a thought factory, and remain the best in both concept design and execution to help our clients future proof their businesses.”

A keen eye for innovation

Mehera is keen to leverage technology in his company and, by extension, in the kitchens and restaurants it designs for clients. One key goal is to increase efficiency, a vital component in the design and operation of kitchens for restaurants in airports and stations, which are a core part of the work promaFox handles.

“We are also training our staff on BIM, as well as implementing digital task management and planning,” he notes. “That is key to the modernisation of the company’s processes.”

Internally, this modernisation



process is happening quickly. For clients, however, the change to a more highly technologised environment may be much more gradual.

“The use of technology in foodservice is still in its infancy,” Mehera says. “Large operators with many different premises may have sophisticated enterprise systems, but in the area in which we work the average client may have just one restaurant or hotel that is not very hi-tech in its approach, particularly in the kitchen.

“Cooking is about emotion. It is done with love and technology cannot give you that emotion. Chefs may, therefore, resist technology in favour of creativity, but the key is to find a balance between technology and emotion.

“Customers want to experience some of the emotion but there is no need for smaller operators to be hesitant about technology that can help them to run their restaurants more efficiently.”

A new concept from promaFox – the Plug and Play kitchen – is designed to

help clients address the challenge of improving their use of technology. Delivery of the concept draws on Mehera’s background in the technology sector. In essence, it is a simple idea – the electrical infrastructure and the plumbing are channelled along the walls of the kitchen so that equipment can be plugged in anywhere.

“This gives operators much more flexibility and allows them to change equipment more easily,” Mehera says.



Clockwise from top left: ETH Zurich food & lab; The Circle; Dolder Grand; the plug and play concept kitchen

Beyond borders

So far, promaFox has completed 675 projects. Each one has brought valuable lessons for the team. The early cruise ship projects Fuchs worked on in the 1990s, for instance, taught him how to work with confined spaces. The football stadium development in Lucerne helped the team understand how to create a solution that would cater for huge numbers of people. Projects for prestigious banks gave the company experience in blending fine-dining and quick-service options.

All of this experience is brought to bear on current projects, one of which is the most challenging the company has every taken on – The Circle project at Zürich Airport.

“In the Circle there are two hotels, a conference centre and many more catering outlets,” explains Mehera. “There are 12 different gastronomy formats in total. It is a CHF1.7bn project that is set to open in September, 2020, and we are mainly involved in the gastronomy planning.”

Whatever the scale or profile of a project, promaFox takes the same deeply involved approach, treating each solution as unique and going to great lengths to understand precisely what each customer needs.

“We must listen actively to what the customer wants to help them define and understand the concept for a project,” Mehera says. “We have to open up our customers’ horizons first and help them to define the concept to avoid any confusion later on in the process. That ensures that we deliver the right solution. It also helps us to deliver more quickly because we understand our client’s goal before we start to work on drawings or costing the project.”

Having begun with projects abroad before focusing uniquely on the Swiss market, promaFox is now planning to expand beyond the border again. It is looking to enter the German market in the near future and is planning to open a local office, while remaining the key player in Switzerland.

“Whatever market we are working in, we are not cheap,” says Mehera. “So, we focus on projects that need a top team of experts. We want to ensure we are working with clients at an earlier stage in gastronomy projects – helping them more at the concept stage, as well as in the design and execution of the solution.”

“The diversity of the work we do is what I enjoy most about this job,” he adds. “There is so much involved in each project – the food, the equipment, the building, the technology. The variety of the projects is amazing and I not only get to work with good people who really enjoy what they do, but also with the most fabulous customers.”

With a blend of enthusiasm and energy in its management team, the company combines a clear and consistent vision with an eye for innovation – a blend that will no doubt serve it well as it expands its reach. ■



KEY PROJECTS

Credit Suisse Tower, Zürich: restaurant (530 capacity), panibar (100 capacity), coffee bar (120 capacity)

ETH Zurich food & lab, Zürich: 260 sq m food island

Bellikon Rehabilitation Clinic, Bellikon: 1,900 sq m food island, à la carte restaurant, cafeteria

Swiss Re Management, temporary staff catering, Zürich: 1,500 sq m, 720 capacity free-flow employee restaurant and served executive restaurant

AIR, Zürich Airport: 1,250 sq m public free flow restaurant, bar (280 capacity), bakery

Zürich stadium: working with Burkard Meyer Architects, Baden

The Dolder Grand, Zürich: working with Foster and Partners Ltd., London

The Circle: current large-scale development for Zürich Airport