



## An Interview with... DANIEL DE JESUS

**As he prepares to celebrate 10 years of fresh & yummy business breakfasts and working lunches, Daniel de Jesus, Founder and Director at Al Desco, reveals a little from behind the scenes.**

### Q: WHERE DID THE IDEA FOR AL DESCO COME FROM?

Soggy, bland sandwiches! I spent my fair share of breakfast meetings and working lunches having to make do with the offerings available from in-house caterers or food that had been ordered in from the high street suppliers. It was so uninspiring. I then spent a year travelling and saw how so many countries managed to combine fresh, quick and affordable food, no matter what the occasion.

I returned to the UK with a desire to change the perception of outside catering. We shouldn't need to settle for those soggy, unimaginative sandwiches or salads that were a mere afterthought.

I teamed up with a partner who shared my passion for fresh quality food and

utilised my catering experience from my early 20's. We spotted a gap in the market and grabbed the opportunity with both hands. I've never looked back.

At Al Desco, we celebrate our 10th anniversary this year, which is a huge milestone for us. Our vision to produce fresh food from the highest quality ingredients remains the same, yet we're constantly investing in our future. We want to ensure we're always providing the best possible customer experience.

My intention for Al Desco was to have the values of a family business. My wife plays a significant role, ensuring we keep those values and helps the team with the strategic growth to explore new markets. We're currently looking at additional commercial ventures, so it's all systems go for us in 2019.

### Q: WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT RUNNING AL DESCO?

It might sound a cliché, but I love working with my team. We're diverse and multicultural, which plays a huge part in our success. We have an open door policy when it comes to ideas and improvements for the business. Everyone's ideas are welcome and that's what makes the team so integral to our

overall success. Not only does it generate new and existing ideas, it allows me time to concentrate on other commercial aspects of the business.

I have a young family so running Al Deco, whilst not your typical 9-5, allows me the opportunity to create time to spend with my family, which is hugely important to me.

It's great being your own boss, but the flip side to the positives, mean that ultimately when an issue arises, I'm at the heart of making decisions to get them resolved 24/7. Like most businesses, there are many nuts and bolts involved in making the Al Desco machine operate, so if one or two of those don't work you need to be pro-active in getting things resolved. Of course, urgency is the key - whether it's a stock issue, supplier issue, or a logistical challenge. The buck stops firmly at my door.

But, I wouldn't change it, as there have been so many great memories over the last decade. The first one was moving from making sandwiches in my kitchen flat, to finally moving into a business space and setting up our commercial kitchen. We've since then moved to larger premises in Waterloo due to substantial business growth - which was a very proud moment for me.

### Q: HOW HANDS-ON ARE YOU?

At the beginning, it was very much a matter of all hands on deck. The company has been built organically from the bottom up and I wouldn't have it any other way. I would put in eighteen-hour days in the kitchen and then deliver the food by bicycle. When you care about your business as much as I do, it can be hard to pass on the reigns of the day to day operations. However, through business coaching and mentorship, I soon realised that the key to growing a successful business is developing the people around me. Building a loyal and effective team is paramount to building a successful business. It's my duty to build a business that offers not only staff development but also a future for them to aspire to.

Today, I'm very much involved in the day to day running of things, but more from a strategic and growth perspective. The last two years have seen me take a step away from the kitchen, leaving that in the capable hands of Ann, our Kitchen Manager, and the team. My focus is on ensuring Al Desco is running as a healthy and profitable business. That said, I don't need much of an excuse to get back in the kitchen, get my sleeves rolled up and help make the sandwiches. It's what makes us so unique from our competitors. We're like one big family.

### Q: HOW OFTEN DO YOU CHANGE THE MENU?

It varies - we don't have a set plan for menu changes other than the Christmas period. We listen to our customers throughout the year, review market trends and carry out our own market research. We're able to make changes and implement them relatively quickly so we're always adapting to what our clients want.

I help oversee the initial stages, when we're looking to change the menu, but I tend to leave the implementation to Ann and the team. There is so much to consider even when making small changes to the menu. Testing the recipe, sourcing the ingredients, managing stock, costings, promoting the new menu, changing the ordering system, the list goes on. So, it's a great sense of satisfaction when we see a new product being ordered on a frequent basis. Our 'Free From' section has become really popular since we made changes last year.

I've personally tasted everything on the menu, because I have to give everything the Al Desco seal of approval. I'm a carnivore at heart, so I love the Chicken & Chorizo sandwich. Although, more recently, I find myself eating more of the veggie options, so the Falafel wrap has to be up there too. But, to be honest, I

like them all - of course I'm biased, but because they are freshly made, they all taste so good!

### Q: WHAT'S IN STORE FOR THE NEXT 10 YEARS?

We're always looking at ways to improve efficiency, essentially to make our customers' lives more simple. So, we've recently invested in a new order management system, which will help streamline the business. I love investing in new equipment, I'm like a kid at Christmas, but it's important that the team has what they need to continue to provide a seamless service at the backend.

I love to also get out of the office to meet new people, share our ideas and brand values. To see people buy into our concept and embrace what we do is so satisfying, and it's something that I'll continue to do as the business grows.

We have big plans for Al Desco, but there is one thing we will never change - and that's producing fresh and yummy food!

