

NEJLEPŠÍ ČESKÁ VÍNA A NEJLUXUSNĚJŠÍ SUV SVĚTA

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Forbes

A close-up portrait of Sanjiv Suri, a man with dark hair and a wide, toothy smile, wearing a dark pinstriped suit jacket over a white collared shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

**DO-
GOODER**

Why does Sanjiv Suri get up at four o'clock in the morning and want to give away everything ?

MY TO-BE LIST

Zátiší, Mlýnec, Bellevue or Žofín Garden. Sanjiv Suri's super-league restaurants that changed the Czech Republic. He opened his first fine dining restaurant in Prague 27 years ago and taught Czechs how to enjoy food. Nowadays he is showing them how to be generous and give more to others.

He has already donated tens of millions of Czech crowns to worthy causes.

LUCIE HRDLIČKOVÁ, JAROSLAV MAŠEK, PHOTO: JIŘÍ TUREK AND JANA JABŮRKOVÁ



“**T**his needs to be recyclable”, Sanjiv Suri says with his cute Czech accent, which often makes Czechs laugh.

He sometimes pronounces words incorrectly and sometimes mixes Czech and English in a single sentence. He was brought up speaking English and uses English proverbs and expressions, though his native language is Hindi. Now he is holding a bowl made from biodegradable material and is eager to show how he would fill it with mashed potatoes, put a schnitzel on top, and sell it as ‘good-quality fast food’ at the Manifesto food festival or at the Old Town Square Christmas market.

His restaurants are located in the heart of Prague, within walking distance of the Charles Bridge. You can smell the delicious food when you walk in. His office is above the entrance to the Mlýnec restaurant, which has a lovely view of the riverbank. A few steps away and across the street is the Bellevue. If you continue walking upriver, you come to the Žofin Garden restaurant, housed in an elegant palace on a small island. A few blocks behind the Bellevue stands the V Zátiši restaurant, the first privately owned fine dining restaurant in Prague, opened by Sanjiv in 1991.

If you’re wondering how Prague’s guru of fine dining can utter the words ‘fast food’ without blushing, you’re in for a surprise. This 58-year-old native of India is open and capable of adapting. And, above all, he is a businessman. His Zátiši Group did not grow into a 600-million-Czech-crown business without Sanjiv having a nose for innovation as well as good food. ‘We need to disrupt our business in a positive way’, he says. ‘Why do you always need a waiter between a guest and good-quality meal?’ However, he has slowed down a bit in the last few years and spends more of his leisure time on philosophy, with his family – especially his children – and by himself. He gets up at 4 a.m., goes for a short walk, exercises and meditates before running to work, getting there first and brimming

with new ideas.

In addition, philanthropy is now an important part of his life. He has committed himself publicly to giving away nearly half of his Zátiši Group gross profits, totalling so far tens of millions of Czech crowns. The money goes to volunteer projects in the Czech Republic as well as to underdeveloped countries. ‘We measure the effectiveness of the project’, he explains. ‘For just 1 euro you can provide school meals for one child for an entire month. This way, you also encourage the child to come to school regularly. You can’t buy much for 1 euro in the Czech Republic. But it doesn’t mean we don’t help here. You just need to find the right way to do it.’ Sanjiv Suri has decided to ‘feed the good wolf in himself’, to follow a path of positive thinking. He is now in the process of establishing his own foundation, which would enable him to share his money more efficiently.

Do you celebrate Czech Christmas?

Well, after 27 years here, yes. We celebrate it with our children, but I don’t buy many presents. But if someone wants to get a present from me, he has to tell me, otherwise I am quite immune to such celebrations - whether Czech or Indian. I am OK with them, but I have Christmas every day, in fact.

How can you have Christmas every day?

It’s simple. To have Christmas means to be really happy. And to be happy is basically your own internal decision. I’ve decided to be happy, and so I’m really happy. Try it and you’ll see for yourself. It’s enough to enjoy the present and think positively.

Okay we don’t really know how to do that ...

There are many things happening around us and it’s up to us how to see them and how to react. You can see them as an opportunity or they can make you sad. I’ve chosen the first option.

Can you train yourself to have this attitude ?

I started with it in 2012. In June of that year I was on holiday in the south of France and I collapsed with terrible pain. Doctors found three displaced intervertebral discs and were talking about an operation. I started to meditate and exercise a lot. If you want to live in the present, intense pain is ideal. You can’t think of the future or the past, it really holds you in the present. You slowly start to admire simple things such as a flower, a tree or the sunrise. But they are there to admire every day.

Ok but when did you last see one?

This morning I got up around 4 o’clock in the morning. Without the alarm. I drink a litre of lukewarm water, go for a walk and then I exercise & meditate for a while. After that I leave for work.

You seriously don’t have any negative thoughts sometimes?

In 2005 I experienced a very bad break-up. I came home and everything was gone. Including my two children, who I didn’t see for 6 months. I looked for them all over Europe, and finally found them in France. It was the worst period of my life. But nowadays I wouldn’t change anything from that at all. Everything that has happened to me was somehow good for me – even though at that moment it felt terrible. In the end you are made of all these experiences into one man. And that is you.

Do you communicate with your ex-wife these days?

Of course. It’s easy. If you want to have a good relationship with your children, you have to get on with their mum (laughing). People often complicate their lives, but it’s quite simple. And I’m grateful for everything that has happened to me. If you’re grateful, you can’t be negative. Your mind is one-directional. Try it! You really can’t be grateful for something and also criticise it. It doesn’t work.

What should we be grateful for?

For all we have here. If you looked at your life as if it were a wall, you’d probably find that 98 bricks out of 100 are perfectly in place. But we sometimes spend our lives watching those two bricks that are somehow

out of place.

Did you have a spiritual teacher?

No, I was lucky. I met the Dalai Lama a few times, every time he was in the Czech Republic for Forum 2000. Once he came to our restaurant and he did not want to return to Zofin. He wanted to stay in our restaurant. I said OK, but on one condition. Everyone looked at me as if I were crazy to set conditions for the Dalai Lama. But I just wanted to spend time with him. So we talked for nearly three hours. I had some quite stupid questions, such as how to meditate correctly or how to keep peace in the world. But he often answered, 'I don't know.' I was completely shocked.

We all try to know everything, or we just pretend to know everything. Older people talking to younger ones, bosses to subordinates... It's all nonsense. The sentence 'I don't know' is one of the most powerful

in the world. It frees you as well as opens new opportunities.

What do you mean?

Well, it was essential for me to understand that change was unavoidable. And apart from that, I didn't have it under control at all. So, the only possibility of how to get ready for the change was to admit I was vulnerable. And that I don't know much. I use this vulnerability and being frank to move forward. Thanks to this, I drop negative thoughts and I strive to open some space for compassion, kindness, gratitude or wit. I started with this six years ago and, believe me, it was not easy at all for me, as a '52-year-old monkey'. But I never gave up and it's getting better all the time.

How can you mix a positive philosophy with business? Aren't you somehow 'softer' in business then?

You can't mix them at all. They're totally different. The fact that I try to be decent

and positive doesn't mean that I neglect our business. We keep planning, making strategies, because we want to be better and bigger with more profit. I just want to feed the 'good wolf' in myself and not feed the negative one. I don't watch much TV. I still have an analogue set that hasn't received signals for at least 5 years as the signal here is digital, and I don't use social networks a lot.

How did your 'game' in the Czech Republic start?

It was in 1991. I was working as a hotel manager in Liberia and my girlfriend was from Sweden and worked at the Swedish embassy. Suddenly she was offered a job in Prague. I decided to come with her. I was wondering what I could do here, but I knew for sure I didn't want to work for any big corporation. I had approximately \$10,000 and I looked for something I could start on my own. So

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we applied for the tender of the cafe under the stairs of the National Museum.

Who is 'we'?

I got to know Alan Krautstengl, who was my interpreter, especially for the authorities and in offices. He later became the rector of the Anglo-American University in Prague. He introduced me to his mother, Dana Krautstenglova, who still owns a small share of the Zátíší Group. But she really has a great deal of energy. She was something like an 'engine', always full of ideas and inspiring us. Thanks to her we have our slogan, 'Yes, we can.'

Did you cook meals at that cafe?

No. We served cakes and sandwiches

A night bar, more or less. We agreed, and we decorated the room and left for Nuremberg in Germany to get some furniture at IKEA. At that time there was no IKEA here and we wanted to get simple furnishings for our new restaurant. In the kitchen we had only two ordinary MORA gas stoves, nothing else.

So your V Zátíší brand was taken from the old wine bar?

Exactly. But the logo is ours.

How did you manage to make it work?

Unbelievably. I think we were really the first private restaurant in Prague that focused on fine dining. We cooked five meals only, but using the best

anything for a long time. And I wasn't able to explain, in any case, since I didn't speak Czech then and he didn't speak English. He just understood what I wanted. Another person was Honza Bures in the main kitchen. He still works for us, as the executive chef of our catering division. In fact, many people have stayed with us since we started out.

Did you get the feeling of being a success quickly?

Well, there was really no time for philosophy or strategic planning. We started at the Holesovice food market at 5.30 a.m. to buy all the fresh food we needed and we finished work after midnight every day. We changed our menu quite often, because we cooked only the food people liked.

How did you like Prague when you first came in 1991?

When I arrived, there were people who didn't smile, and everything was grey. I think we had such a success with V Zátíší from the beginning because people liked our staff with their smiling faces. When I hired waiters and waitresses, I immediately eliminated those with experience, as they were spoiled from the Communist era. They only knew the typical 'standard Socialism' way of working in a restaurant, and I couldn't stand it. We started to create a new restaurant system. We didn't use the old one called 'mirror', but we had a piece of paper on which every employee put down what he or she had to eat and drink. If it was a cocktail or a shot. They didn't pay anything. I just wanted to know. It helped to get the mutual trust which did not exist during Socialism.

It's really an important trust. How often have you sacked people for stealing?

Well, maybe only twice in 20 years. I remember an assistant manager who was sacked just for 100 Kč. Well, if you have rules, you have to stick to them. What does 'stocktaking' mean? It means that you don't believe your employees, no

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only. It was such a small room, just for serving and with only one sink. A wild time! Coffee cost 3.20 Kč and we had three prices, according to the queue. If the queue went around the corner, Dana charged a higher price at the cash register – only a little higher, of course (laughing), 3.80 Kč.

I was serving and cleaning up after our guests. And one day we had a special guest. It was Mr. Prerovsky, who had been given back his house in Liliova street, close to Betlemske square, in the restitution process after 1989. He told us that he had been visiting our cafe regularly and he liked it a lot. He asked us if we wanted to open a restaurant on the ground floor of his house.

Was there one there already at the time?

Yes, there was a wine bar called V Zátíší.

produce, and the prices were not low – from 295 to 495 Kč per menu, which was a lot of money at that time. We served at least three guests in every seat each evening. There were queues in front of the restaurant and we used a system called 'cloakroom time'. We were able to serve one customer, from cloakroom to cash register, within 60 minutes.

Were you the most expensive restaurant at the time?

Not really. There used to be the Nebozisek restaurant on Petrin Hill or some hotel restaurants that were more expensive. But we focused on people who wanted fresh and good food. I believed in the concept that worked abroad, and it worked here as well. I was very lucky with the staff. For example, with chef Zdenek Doubek, who knew immediately what I wanted. No need to explain



thing else. We have a different attitude towards ours. We believe them – until they prove us wrong. When I saw then that our restaurant was full every evening and our daily revenue was around 60,000 Kč, I was happy and knew that everything was OK.

Why did you later start with catering?

We needed to move forward again. Guests started to ask us if we could make dinner or food for a party with 20 or 40 people. We stopped saying no, and since 1998 we have been extremely busy. We were first called Blue Moon Catering, but the biggest challenge came in 2000. Prague was hosting the International Monetary Fund Congress. Within three and half days we had to prepare 11,000 fine dining meals. Our chefs slept on mattresses there. They'd sleep for a few hours and then change places with their colleagues. They wor-

ked and cooked in turn nonstop. It was a real challenge.

Who was ordering from you then?

International banks such as Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Arab Banking Corporation, Chase Manhattan. Every client was an individual with completely different demands – breakfast for six CEOs or dinners at the State Opera for a thousand most important clients. For example, when Sandy Weill, the Citigroup chairman then, ordered dinner for his most important clients, the plan was that I would discuss everything with his head chef in New York first.

So I called him, and he asked me if I could make chicken tikka masala – Indian chicken skewers. At first, I thought he was telling me that just because I was Indian. I tried to persuade him to have something different, something more suitable for the Spanish Hall at the

Prague Castle. Well, we had a bit of a discussion, but then Sandy said that his wife liked chicken tikka. So, we came to an agreement. He had a clear vision: If she's happy, the event is a success. So, we delivered a success.

Your Fresh & Tasty concept, delivering less costly meals to canteens, school kitchens and offices, was that also a logical business step?

I sometimes teased our head chefs by telling them that they can make excellent meals but they're not able to cook and save money. They always use our best-quality produce, the finest of gastronomy. I was also telling them that if there were an economic crisis, we would have a problem. So that's how the idea was born. Then, we really did have a recession in 2008, and it helped us keep our heads above water. At that time, we got the contract with the In

ternational School of Prague in Nebu-
sice. And then we started to get more
companies, including Czech Television,
Nova.

**How much did you lose during the
financial crisis?**

In our restaurants and catering, sales
fell by about 40%. And I'm not talk-
ing about profitability. Well, we saw
the strength of our culture then. We
offered two options to people in every
department of our company. The first
one was that we would start to make
people redundant and also decrease
wages, while the second option was
that employees would be able to take
more unpaid days off, but their basic
hourly wages would remain the same.
Of course, with the view that as soon as
sales grew again, they would all come
back. They all chose the second option
unanimously. And we overcame the
crisis quite quickly.

How are you doing these days?

This September and October have
been the best ever in our history.
We have annual revenues of over
600 million Kč. We prepare up to 10
catering events at once every day.
Catering accounts for 45% of our
profits, Fresh & Tasty 25% and the
remaining 30% from fine dining.

**And when you look at the profits in
terms of profit distribution?**

Our restaurants are the most profita-
ble. According to Trip Advisor, all of
our restaurants are among the top five
fine dining restaurants in Prague & in
terms of having the best view Bellevue
& Mlýnec. And Bellevue is number one.
We also get similar rankings in food
quality. But fine dining is very vulnerable
during an economic slowdown.

**Nowadays you are even thinking of
starting a new business connected with
fast food. How does that fit with Zátíší
fine dining?**

Very well. We'll be cooking under our
brand at the Manifesto market until
Christmas. Very simple but good-qual-
ity meals. The fact that I save you time
and serve you a great meal for a cheaper
price than in a restaurant doesn't mean
I'm spoiling our brand. I'd say the
opposite is true. We need to disrupt our
business a bit. You might not always
need a waiter between the chef and the
customer. Sometimes the waiter is the
reason we're not satisfied with a restau-
rant. So why not have a peek at another
kind of business?

**Could your good-quality fast food
become another business department
or division ?**

I don't know (laughing), but why not
try it?

**You announced publicly a few years
ago that you would give away half your
profits to charity. Why?**

I'm used to giving a tenth of my
income to those who need it more
than we do. In India there is no social
welfare system, so there are lots of
opportunities to help. A few years ago I
was talking to a couple of entrepreneurs
here that had similar ideas. We wanted
to join 'Giving Pledge', following the
examples of Bill Gates and Warren
Buffett. People just give away half
of their income. Well, in the end we
didn't carry out this plan for a few
reasons, such as their wives and so on
(laughing). But I was determined to do
something anyway.

How much do you give away annually?

I'm sorry, but I don't think it's impor-
tant to say the exact amount publicly.
But I stick to the rule of sending half
of my profits to various philanthropic
projects. I don't mean net profits but
EBITDA profits. This year it should be
around 40 to 50 million Kč.

(Forbes was able to see the internal
overview of gifts – The Editors)

**You support more than 30 different
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choose them?

Well, there hasn't been a real system so far. When we meet someone, it's the so-called 'spray and pray' system more or less. But I really want to focus on it more systematically. My niece Preetika and older brother look after the Swaraj Foundation, which is named after my mother. It focuses on four areas: supporting the poorest women through education, nutrition & energy.

How do you verify that your money went where it was intended?

My brother, sister-in-law and niece look after that in India. Every quarter they show me the results and I can see how we are helping to change India. We also want to supply micro-loans to Indian women to help them start small businesses. We will therefore connect with Bunker Roy, the famous Indian thinker and philanthropist. A few years

ago, he was even named as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine. We also donate money in Rwanda, to help train people to become flower growers, with a guaranteed purchase of goods later.

Why do you put more money into underdeveloped countries than into the Czech Republic?

I need to see the effectiveness of the donations. For 1 euro you can buy school lunches for one child in India for an entire month. This will encourage him/her to come to school regularly. But you can't buy much for 1 euro in the Czech Republic. This doesn't mean that we don't want to help here. We support Člověk v tísni, UNICEF, Dobrý Anděl and many other projects. I'm now considering establishing our own foundation in the Czech Republic which would be co-owned by the Zátíší

Group.

Is there an economic reason for that, too?

Actually, yes. One reason is to have a better overview of philanthropy and another one is my preoccupation about what will happen to my company in the future. How to protect it if something happens to me. Last year I had a stroke. I don't like talking about it, but this was another incentive for me to do something. I want to motivate my key employees by offering them shares in the company in a new ownership structure. Maybe the future will look like this: 60% of the Zátíší Catering Group will be owned by the foundation, 20% owned by me and 20% by the most important employees. This is crucial for the future of the company.

You have given away millions of Czech crowns. Have you never had

the desire to buy something luxurious for yourself, like a Bugatti Veyron?

And what would I do with it? Have you ever tried driving a Bugatti in a 50 km speed limit. I can wear only one shirt at a time. Between 4 and 8 in the morning I drink only water, and evenings I tend not to eat at all. I don't need more money for my life. Of course, my children study at expensive schools, we go on holidays – but what would I do with more money? I don't want to spoil my children. The older ones, when they are over 20, will need to find their own way, by themselves. They have to find their 'karma' and be 'world ready'.

So, what makes you happy?

My biggest pleasure is being with myself. When I cook for my kids, I'm in paradise. Spirituality is my hobby. Perhaps because it has such deep roots in India. We say, 'Water the roots, enjoy the fruits'. If you water only the leaves, it won't bring anything. You need to get to the roots. After 28 years here I wouldn't say that I'm Czech – even though I was given the number 13 for my residency permit and I have a Czech passport now.

How does a native of India live in the Czech Republic?

Great, really. If you're asking me about racism, I've never experienced it here. Maybe when I go to a local pub in a small village, the men are a little drunk and I might hear something. But I smile and they calm down.

What do you like about Czech people and what don't you like?

I like your flexibility, adaptability. I don't like the political corruption. It almost makes me angry when I hear Czechs say that this is normal. Czech business people should take more responsibility for social development. People that did not want to even hear about philanthropy 10 years ago are today donating or at least intend to. So change is coming, the direction is positive, but it could go a little faster.

What does the fine-dining king like to eat?

Simple meals. Mainly vegan meals – although my children say: 'Our Dad is

a vegan until he is not.' I don't have a preference in international cuisines. I tend to encourage our chefs to cook simply. Three or four flavours on a plate are enough. When you put less on the plate, there is less chance to spoil it.

When did you start serving Indian cuisine at V Zátíši?

I didn't think about it at all. For me, it wasn't important. But a few years ago I had a special wish from a very rich Indian. He wanted to organise a wedding for his daughter. A huge, luxurious, five-day wedding in Prague. And he needed Indian cuisine. I desperately called my Indian friends to find a chef in India for the event. The chef arrived in Prague three days before the wedding, and he turned out to be great – and an amazing person. He has been in Prague ever since. At V Zátíši & Zátíši Catering, of course.

And did the wedding come off well?

Yes. I think we've seen a lot in our job, but we couldn't help staring. For example, at a 5-metre-high statue of Ganesh made from ice and which arrived in a huge special cooler. Ruzyně Airport was full of private jets. I also ordered 2,500 bottles of Dom Pérignon, the biggest order in Czech history so far.

Where do you want to see your group in a few years' time?

It doesn't matter what we'll be doing exactly. But we need to keep the best service. Everyone from our team needs to have enough space to learn and improve. We have neglected this a bit

recently, so we need to look after the company culture and teamwork in the group. We also have a target to reduce employee turnover to at most 10% next year. It's feasible. The main goal is to keep good employees, of course. Next year there'll be bonuses linked to it for the first time. It feels like a family to me because our key employees have been with us for more than 20 years. So it's very important.

After all these years, what still keeps you going?

It's a pleasure to contribute to the cultivation of the market. People are eating better, they are more interested in what they eat and they have their demands. I still remember how quiet Czechs were at the beginning of the 90s. They just sat there, and when we offered two types of gin they were thrilled. Nowadays Czechs complain when they're not happy with their food, and they are able to recognize quality. That really pleases me.

Well, your business is much more difficult than before, isn't it?

I don't think like that. It gives me pleasure. But we want to improve the area of fast food. Maybe next year I'll be standing at the Christmas market on Old Town Square to sell our fast food. And then I'll tell you if it's really more difficult or not. I feel like a pensioner now. I've cleared my calendar. I don't have a to-do list anymore but a to-be list. We are human beings after all, not human doings.

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