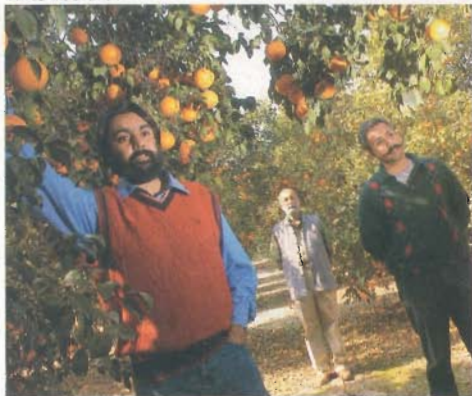


SUMEET INDER SINGH



## orange county 36

The Ahluwalia family is the oldest and by far the most successful kinnow growers in the state. Their corporate-style of farming and hands-on involvement has helped them blaze a trail of success.

ISHAN TANKHA

## festive bonanza 43

The heritage festivals of Patiala, Amritsar and Kapurthala are truly

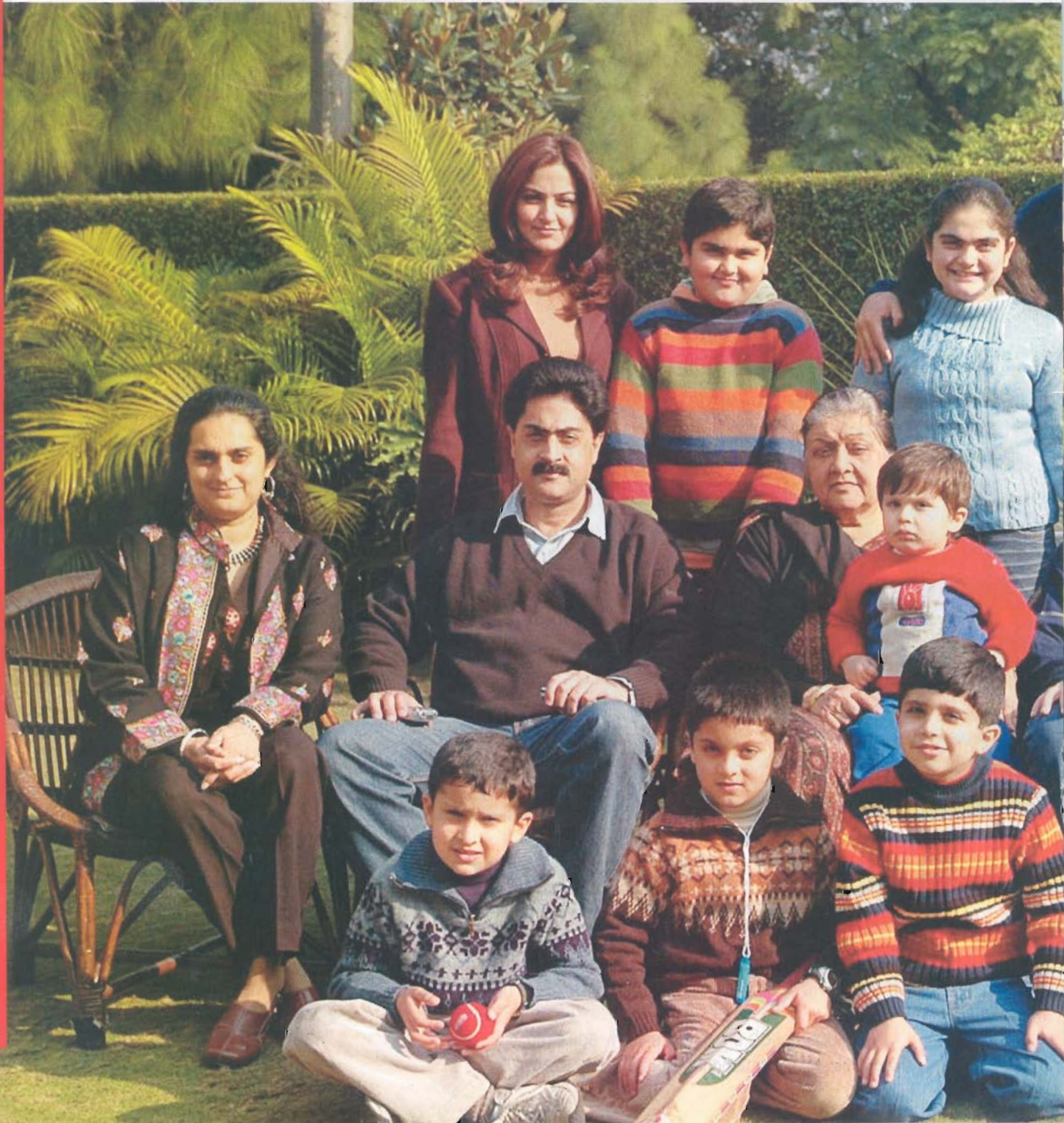


## gourmet gallery 30

The Hot Millions group has put Chandigarh firmly on the fast food circuit. Here's a look at its recipe for success.

# gourmet gurus

THE HOT MILLIONS GROUP HAS PUT CHANDIGARH FIRMLY ON THE FAST FOOD CIRCUIT. HERE'S A LOOK AT ITS RECIPE FOR SUCCESS.



**M**ohan Bir Singh, the eldest son of the Hot Millions family likes to add his bit to coffee magnate Howard Schultz's quote, Starbucks built a company one cup at a time. "Our father, late Col Anant Bir Singh built Hot Millions one burger at a time," says Singh proudly. From a humble beginning almost three decades ago to today (when no Punjabi in this part of the country can talk about

fast food without Hot Millions), it's been a long journey of titillating senses and satisfied palates for this fast food chain. The Hot Millions family is now chaired by Harinder Mohini—or 'super mom' as her three sons Mohan Bir, Aman Bir and Raj Bir love to call her.

"It all started with my mother's culinary skills and dad's business instincts," says Raj Bir, the youngest. "Dad was at the peak of a

promising career in the army, when, in 1978, he opted to resign. It was definitely a daring step to put his pension money at risk but he believed that if he had to plunge into business, that was the right time." Backed by his desire to tap the unexplored market of fast food and the support of his family, he set up Hot Millions in 1979, along with Yankee Doodle, the city's only ice-cream parlour in those days. In 1993, it was merged with Hot Millions.

**Freeze frame**

The Hot Millions family is headed by Harinder Mohini (centre) who's also the company's chairperson

Like all businesses that begin from scratch, the initial days of Hot Millions were rather difficult. While Harinder Mohini, whose initials HM make the name Hot Millions, would get up as early as four in the morning to semi-prepare the eatables to be carried to the restaurant, the children would chip in by doing their bit at the cash counter, kitchen and storage area and even serve the customers. "But we never felt any stress. For us it was like living out our dream," says Mohini. Adds Aman Bir, laughingly: "Dad believed that one should earn his own pocket money, so besides us, he had many other youngsters from college on Hot Millions' rolls.

When he passed away around two months back, Col Singh left behind a strong legacy for his sons. "Not only was he our father and boss, he was also a great friend," echo the sons. "The most important thing we learnt from him is the value of teamwork. He was very generous, in terms of both material assets and time; he was always there for his employees, friends and family. He office was always open, anyone could just walk in," says Mohan Bir. Interestingly, through all the 26 years that he was chairman, Col Singh would personally hand each employee his salary. Striving to live by the high standards of his commitment, Mohini continues to follow the rules laid down by him.

Back in 1995, when Col Singh asked Raj Bir, who was pursuing a course in Certified Public Account-



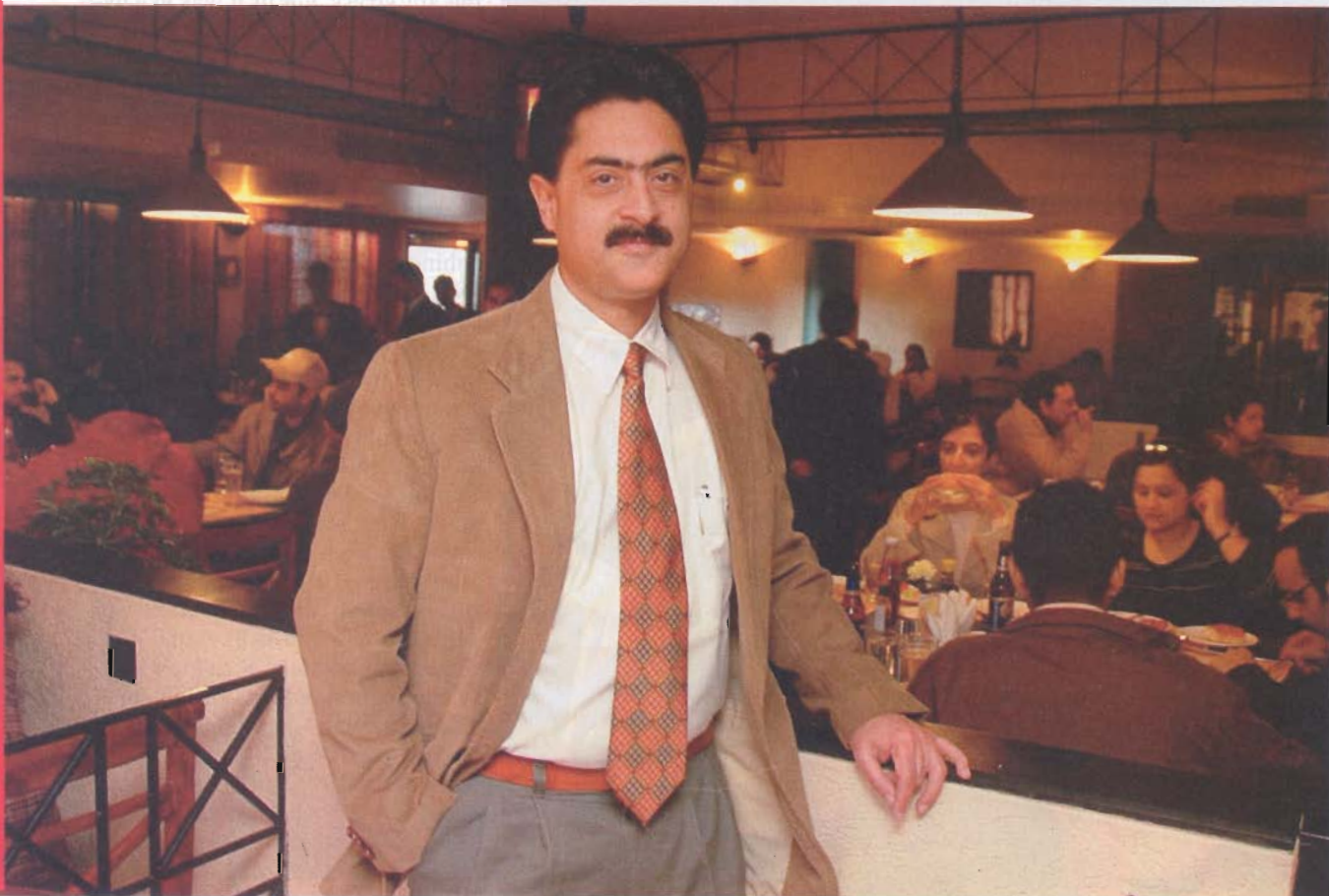
tants in the US, to join him and his brothers in the business, Raj Bir asked him how much he would be paid. To which Col Singh reportedly replied: 'Forget the money you make in America, you are alone there. Here, you are going to be together with your family, can you measure that in terms of money?' How could one argue with that logic?" says Raj Bir. "His devotion to us as a family was outstanding," say daughters-in-law, Bandana, Nupur and Deepika, who feel that Col Singh's generosity and goodness played a large role in turning the Hot Millions business into a "Hot Millions family of 750 employees".

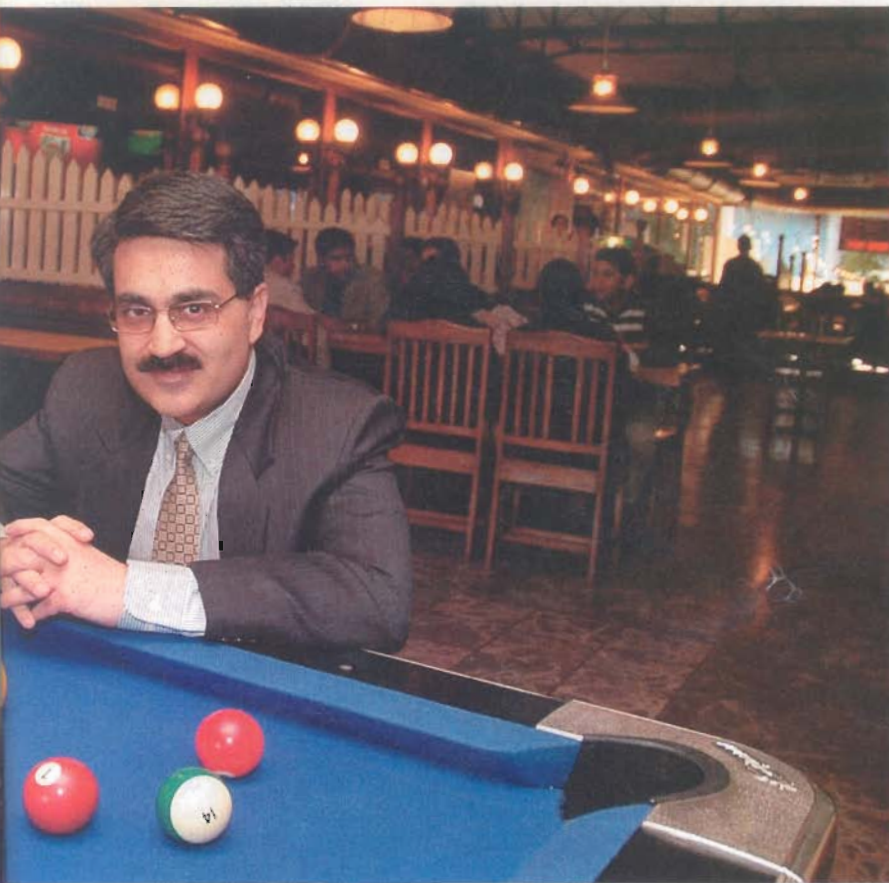
While Aman Bir has been a part of the business since day one, joining the restaurant right after college, Raj Bir joined in 1995. In 2000 Mohan Bir quit the army and joined in too. Mohan Bir and Aman Bir look after day-to-day operations while Raj Bir handles administration and marketing.

Unsurprisingly, their spouses are as much a part of the business as they are. Bandana, Mohan Bir's

## MILLION MILESTONES

- The first Hot Millions outlet was set up in 1979, followed by another in 1992.
- Salad Bar started in 1994.
- Latest addition: Tavern in Sector 9 Panchkula.
- Franchises: In Mohali, Sector 35 Chandigarh, Ludhiana and Dharampur.
- The franchise in Mohali has one family restaurant and one pub called 'Knock Out'.
- The franchise in Chandigarh's Sector 35 has a family restaurant and one full service restaurant and bar called 'The Cellar'.
- The Ludhiana franchise has a quick service restaurant and a fine dining restaurant and bar called 'Down Under'.
- Four years back, the Hot Millions Group took over the management of a three-star hotel called Hotel North Park in Panchkula, where they have also opened a popular nightclub called 'Hideout'.
- At present, the group is busy with a new fine dining Indian restaurant called AB's that has a lounge bar and nightclub in the same premises. This restaurant will be a tribute to the legacy of the Late Col Anant Bir Singh.





**Hot whiz**  
Raj Bir Singh (left) at the popular Hot Millions restaurant; Mohan Bir Singh (below left) at the Salad Bar

wife, is a talented architect and is the person behind the design of all Hot Millions restaurants including the franchises that were set up from 1996 onwards. Nupur, Aman Bir's wife along with Deepika, who's married to Raj Bir, helps their mother-in-law look after the group's base kitchen in the Industrial Area in Chandigarh. Fond of cooking, Deepika also promises to add a lot of new delicacies to the existing 186-items menu.

The history of this popular fast food chain is chequered with a lot of interesting stories. Aman Bir remembers an incident when they got not only their family members but also their friends to help out with work at the restaurant. "It was in 1991, during the days of the Mandal Commission when there were strikes by workers," he recalls. "Hot Millions was the only restaurant open, with family and friends cheer-

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fully helping out with the cooking, serving and cleaning.” Even now they have friends calling up to ask if they can do those things all over again.

Besides the delicacies that await customers at Hot Million's, the Singhs' Sec 9, Chandigarh house is also a mecca when it comes to culinary expertise. When the Singh clan put on their chef caps, they're quite unbeatable. As children, the three brothers taught their mother how to make tandoori paranthas. When in college, Aman Bir remembers slipping into the shoes of the South Indian chef when he was on leave. Much to the surprise of everyone, he expertly managed to turn out 50 dosas a day. But now the three, along with their children and wives, get to cook only when they have time off from their busy schedules.

Food obviously is one thing that binds this family together. Besides the cooking sessions on holidays, Mohini's cold coffee and kathi kebabs are what the family rallies around. “We used to gorge on these when we were young,” smiles Raj. Now it's the grandchildren who relish them. Interestingly, the initial Hot Millions menu was made up of he three boys' favourite dishes.

For Mohini and the late Col, Hot Millions has never been about fancy masterpieces—just good food made from fresh ingredients.

**Green bytes**  
**Aman Bir Singh at Hot Million's North Park, where his mother Mohini has created a green belt**

Meticulous about everything, they would personally train the staff. That explains the setting up of the seven-month old Hot Millions Institute of Hotel Management in Panchkula, from where employees for Hot Millions are often hired.

Aman Bir, who also looks after North Park, shares with us another creative aspect of his mother: “Besides the magic she adds to the food, she also has a green thumb,” he says, pointing to the green belt that she has created at North Park. Besides managing the lawns there, she has also done up the garden at home as well as the one facing the house. The well-manicured gardens make for a great place for the family to unwind every Sunday. The Sunday lunch tradition of rajma-chawal, aloo gobi and dahi bade is followed by volleyball and badminton matches on the lawns.

The fast food magnates' next goal is to expand their reach in northern India, by adding to the number of franchises. “Hot Millions is already hot, the millions are following automatically,” sign off this first generation business family. Good food sure does end with good talk.

■ by Purva Grover