



Press release/feature: May 2008

## **From kitchen porter to pizza chef – Ousman’s recipe for success**

**As figures presented to Birmingham’s One Voice Group show that the West Midlands is winning the battle to bridge the regional skills gap, with thousands of employees improving their career prospects, Ros Dodd meets a former kitchen porter who’s now a top restaurant’s pizza chef**

Ousman Konde’s dream of earning enough money to support his family back home in Senegal looked set to turn sour when he was laid off from his warehouse packing job in Castle Bromwich.

The 41-year-old had arrived in the UK full of hope in 2003 after trying his hand at various jobs in Senegal and Paris.

“I couldn’t speak a word of English, but I found a packing job,” he says. “After two-and-a-half years I was made redundant and friends told me there was a kitchen porter’s job going at Filini restaurant at the Radisson SAS Hotel in Birmingham. My initial reaction was ‘no way; I’m not doing that’, but in the end I took it because I badly needed the money to send to my family.”

However, it wasn’t long before Ousman’s flair for cooking, gleaned from working in restaurant kitchens in Paris and in an industrial bakery in Senegal, caught the attention of Filini’s executive chef, Chris Duffy.

“One day I was doing my porter’s job as usual when I saw one of the kitchen staff chopping chives and asked if I could have a go,” recalls Ousman.

His deftness with a knife was spotted by Chris and Ousman explained how he’d picked up culinary skills in previous jobs.

“Chris took me to one side and asked me if I’d like to be the restaurant’s pizza chef. Although I had experience in making bread, I’d never made a pizza before, but he showed me how to do it and now I make all the pizzas in Filini as well as foccacia bread and pastry.”

According to Chris, Ousman is a “natural” at pizza making and his three types of foccacia bread – for which the restaurant is particularly known – are “first rate”.

“This is the best job I’ve ever had – in Senegal I was earning only £15 a month for working 12-hour night shifts at the bakery – and I’m very happy that my abilities have been recognised, because I certainly didn’t want to be a kitchen porter for the rest of my life,” he says.

Things have turned out well for Ousman personally as well as professionally: his wife, Astou, came over from Senegal to join him in March last year and their first child is due later this month.

Kathrine Ohm Thomas, general manager of the Radisson SAS Hotel, Birmingham, which last month hosted the launch of an initiative between Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and the West Midlands CBI, called Working Together on Skills, says Ousman's promotion underlines the hotel's policy of maximising employees' potential.

"We have a policy of recruiting on the basis of attitude rather than skills," she says. "Ousman had the right attitude – and we've since discovered he had also had some wonderful culinary skills. We're delighted to have helped him to develop those. He is a great asset to Filini."

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