



Happy times

It's one of Ashburton's foremost heritage buildings and was a regular CBD hospitality spot until the Speight's Ale House closed nearly two years ago.

Now it's back. With a new name and new restaurant plans from excited owners ahead of a January opening. Find out more, pages 4-5.

THE BIG READ

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Exciting times. Ashburton's splendid looking Speight's Ale House, empty since March last year, will soon reopen as The Ale House under Harpreet "Happy" Aulakh, pictured, in his second local venture. He also runs the Noble 600 restaurant.



Happy's recipe. Trust the town



Confidence, community and customer demand drive second venue opening for young Ashburton restaurateur despite uncertain trading times.

by Daryl Holden

In a tough hospitality climate, where restaurants can come and go, Harpreet Aulakh is backing Ashburton again.

Because the slim, fit-looking 27-year-old chef, better known as Happy, is preparing to open a second restaurant, The Ale House, in the former Speight's Ale House building in mid-January.

It will be the second restaurant lease he's acquired in Ashburton in a short space of time, following

taking over Noble 600 at the Ashburton Club and Mutual School of Arts (MSA) last year.

That's a rapid expansion by any measure, let alone in uncertain trading times, and on paper it looks bold. But to Happy, it feels logical, and certainly not a gamble driven by ego or opportunity.

It's a move shaped by how he approaches work, people and place, and by a belief that Ashburton will support businesses that show up for it.

That positivity even begins with the name he goes by, which, he insists, has nothing to do with branding.

"I prefer Happy," he said, naturally smiling as the name would suggest should be the case.

"It's not that I changed my name because I moved here. It was given by my teacher in India when I was five or six. I was laughing too much in school and they said, 'why are you so happy?'"

"So, everybody started calling me Happy."

It's a small story, but it hints at something larger, a way of approaching life that has followed him across borders and into a country he now calls home and one where he's built a life and career in the past decade.

In Ashburton, it started in 2021 after he moved from Motueka where he worked as a chef for a year. Before that he spent four years in Kaikōura, cheffing at The Whaler and The Groper, two neighbouring seafood restaurants owned by the same people.

"That's what I'm trying to replicate," he said.

"That's where the whole idea came from to do this."

That stretch in whale watching country came after he'd moved from India to Auckland when he was just 18, enticed here to complete a two-year culinary university course. Australia had been the original plan, but the university study fees in New Zealand were more affordable,

and a relative in Auckland helped him settle.

"But coming to New Zealand was really hard," he admitted.

"I didn't even know that New Zealand had two parts, South and North.

"Kaikōura didn't even exist in my head at that time. I just knew Christchurch, Auckland, Wellington and Queenstown."

But in reality, his cooking journey began long before New Zealand, tracing back to growing up in India. The family had moved around the country a lot because his father was a high ranking official in the Indian army. With his dad often away from home, Happy spent much of his time in the kitchen with his mother and two older sisters where his relationship with food first took shape.

"They were always cooking something, so I was always in the kitchen with them because I had nothing else to do," he said.

THE BIG READ



We're ready: Harpreet "Happy" Aulakh (right) with business partner Rohan Desai in the Noble 600 kitchen. They're now preparing to open The Ale House in the middle of next month, bringing back to life the premises that used to accommodate Ashburton's former flagship Speight's Ale House.

That early familiarity with food stayed with him, and when he eventually made his way to Ashburton, he found a community that welcomed him. "Ashburton has been really good to me," he said.

"It has been like family to me. It has grabbed me with open hands."

His connection to the town deepened during his two years working as a chef at both Noble 600 and the former Speight's Ale House, then owned by Tony Potts, who operated the two venues.

It was then that Happy also learned the history of the MSA club and what it stood for, and why it mattered to the community.

"When I found out it was a working men's club, established in the 1800s, it meant something," he said.

When he took over the Noble lease last year, staffing was one of the biggest challenges, and it remains a major focus as he prepares to open The Ale House.

"The only time Tony struggled was with a lack of staff," Happy said.

"At that time, I was working seven days a week, going there and coming here. That was one of the reasons he released this lease because he could not manage it."

Now, Happy says, the situation has changed. "We've got heaps of staff now," he said.

"I've got CVs coming in, like three per week, and I have never had that before."

He's already hired five staff for the new venue and is still recruiting, with plans for around seven front-of-house workers and three chefs, and he's passionate about hiring locally, especially younger staff.

"And I look for beginners," he

said.

"If you train and treat them well, they will do anything for you."

It's a philosophy shaped by long hours on the floor himself, and one he's carrying into a second opening at a time when hospitality margins are tight, especially for restaurants, and customers are more cautious about where they spend. Happy knows the pressures well, the rising costs, the quieter nights, and the decisions people now think twice about.

"It is tough in this climate," he said.

"But someone has to do it, and people have demand for it."

For Happy, that belief is grounded in what he hears every day, with customers who know his background regularly asking what's happening with the old Speight's Ale House building, which has sat empty since it closed about 20 months ago.

For nearly two years, the closure of the Speight's Ale House, and the emptiness of the much-admired building, left a noticeable gap in the heart of Ashburton's CBD. Long before it poured beer, the heritage-listed building began life as a bank, opening in 1898, and evolving into one of the town's most recognisable gathering places over generations. Its lights going out left more than an empty premises because it marked the loss of a social anchor in Ashburton where such places matter. Bringing it back to life has never been simple, which is why its reopening now feels symbolic, not just of a new business, but of confidence returning to a much-loved corner of town.

And Happy doesn't need market research to know people care.

"Five out of 10 customers ask what is happening with the Speight's Ale House," he said.

That steady curiosity helped shape what would come next, and Happy is clear that The Ale House won't simply mirror Noble 600.

"You can't offer the same thing," he said.

"It will be a different food menu, different drinks, different offerings, different style of music, a different kind of vibe."

Taking on a second venue brings pressure as well as possibility, and Happy doesn't shy away from that. If anything, the nerves tell him he's stretching in the right direction.

"It is good to be nervous," he said.

"It will be a lot of work for myself, leading two different parts and keeping up to date with my family and my time management."

That family involves Happy's sister and brother-in-law, who have been living in Ashburton for about a year, and his girlfriend, whom he's known since India. She now lives and studies in Christchurch.

As for the food you can expect at the Ale House, Indian curries will always be part of who Happy is, but these days his cooking leans simpler, more familiar, and more in tune with what Ashburton diners enjoy.

"I like to cook curries, but my taste buds have also changed," he laughed.

"People here say, why are you not doing chicken tikka masala or korma or something like that? I say it's too fancy."

Still, he hasn't entirely ruled a speciality Indian dish on the menu.

"We might offer a curry of the day," he said.

"It won't be a typical spicy one,



Noble 600, the Ashburton restaurant Happy Aulakh took over last year, was his first leap of faith in Ashburton and the foundation that gave him the confidence to take on a second venue.

but a moderate one."

That's a reflection of a chef who knows his roots, but also his market. And when he talks about the future, it's clear perhaps this isn't where the story ends. Well, that's if you believe his slightly cheeky colleague Rohan Desai, who will co-own and manage The Ale House.

"After this second restaurant, there will be a third one, and more," a smiling Desai said.

"Then the street could be named Happy Street."

Both laugh, the comment thrown away easily.

But opening a second restaurant in a town like Ashburton, and during a cost-of-living crisis, no less, isn't a joke. It's really the result of a decision made years ago, to leave home as a teenager, to come to a new country, to work hard, take chances, and keep going when it would have been easier to stop. And in Ashburton, you get the feeling that more than a few people are happy he did.