

## Kuwait retailer buys franchise for top London restaurant

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Kuwait City: An Italian restaurant in Knightsbridge is set to expand across the Middle East after it proved so popular with a wealthy Kuwaiti businessman that he bought the franchise rights.

Signor Sassi, a favourite lunch spot for Harrods shoppers, will open in 22 countries, the first being Kuwait, in July. Other locations will include Dubai, Riyadh and Cairo.

The brand is being taken overseas by retail mogul Shaikh Marzouk Al Kharafi, from one of the richest families in the Arab world. One of his relatives is hoping to buy Liverpool Football Club. The family's enormous business empire, the Americana Group, already owns the regional rights to Wimpy and KFC and is the single biggest shareholder in Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

The shaikh's personal fortune is thought to be more than £7 billion.

Signor Sassi's owner, Carlo Di Stefano, 65, said: "This is a really exciting opportunity, particularly in the current economic climate. The shaikh and his wife have often come here to eat and they fell in love with our food.

"He wanted to add a more upmarket restaurant to his businesses and the Signor Sassi brand is very well known in the Middle East, as many of our diners are visitors from that area. It's a huge compliment."

Shaikh Marzouk is said to have thought the restaurant's fish and pasta were "amazing" and the service unusually good.

Signor Sassi, which has won a Les Routiers award, is part of the San Carlo Group, which has venues in Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester. The business posted revenues of nearly £17 million last year, with profits of £1.2 million.

Despite the recession, takings have risen by 10 per cent in the past year.

Di Stefano, who moved to Britain from Sicily aged 17 with just £12, puts success down to hard work and fair prices.

The Knightsbridge restaurant is a favourite with Harrods shoppers.