



'Indian diners bolder now – but still love home-style cooking'

Chef Manish Mehrotra is acclaimed for fusion-based modern Indian cuisine, filling kebabs with foie gras, making vadas with ricotta cheese and introducing mishti doi to cannoli. Speaking with Srijana Mitra Das, Mehrotra discussed what shapes his cooking, how Indian diners' tastes have evolved – and what makes him happy about gobi Manchurian.

■ What's been the most powerful influence shaping your cooking?

I think how I travelled to places like Finland, Sweden, Korea, etc. which Indians visited infrequently. There, people thought Indian food was just chicken tikka masala and naan and every Indian is born with a tandoori chicken in his hand! Such misconceptions were inspiring to me.

I wanted to tell people there's so much more to Indian food – I wanted to showcase how Indian

food is not always spicy or curry-based. Today, the food I make can be understood by a Brazilian. When I make a phulka taco, a Mexican gets how every Indian home doesn't have a tandoor.

People simply don't know enough about Indian food overseas. Chefs at Festivals of India, etc. always make the same Shah-jahani korma. Noor Jehani chicken and naan bread – this has created myths I've tried to address.

Secondly, we have such diverse recipes and styles within India. These are also hugely inspiring.

■ Are Indian diners' preferences changing?

The Indian guest is now 100 times more knowledgeable about food. TV shows, internet, magazines and travel have really widened our awareness.

Earlier, going to London was a big thing. The entire neighbourhood would go to see off



someone travelling to London – today people go to London or Thailand like they're travelling to the suburbs! Their awareness has thus hugely increased, making them more adventurous. Alongside, hygiene concerns have grown – today, people want to know whether even the gol-gappa maker is wearing gloves.

Another interesting trend is home-style cooking becoming

very popular. Earlier, people ate out just on special occasions, birthdays, anniversaries, etc. Today, they eat out once a week almost – so, they want simpler, healthier food. Hence, during winter at the Indian Accent restaurant, I serve a home-style khichdi and proudly tell foreigners this is India's favourite comfort food!

■ Aren't you tempted by molecular gastronomy?

No. People doing molecular gastronomy – like my dear friend Gaggan Anand – are doing this outside India. Mine is the most difficult clientele – they know Indian food.

Also, for Indians, two things are very important – we like our food served hot. Molecular gastronomy, which cools down elements, doesn't work well with this. Secondly, no matter how fancy our meals get, we need our daal-roti – without this, our stomachs may be filled but the soul doesn't feel sated!

You should feel you have eaten an Indian meal properly – that's very important. Molecular gastronomy has great surprise factor, with its smoke, shapes and foams – but this only lasts once. Unless the movie in the theatre changes every time, people won't keep going back for the same film.

■ Christmas is about memorable meals – three terrific dishes for you?

Well, I love Nobu's black cod in London and Per Se's egg and truffle custard in New York – but my third dish is directly linked to my cravings for Indian van-waala noodles! That hot, fried dish from roadside vans, the noodles dark and slick with all the chilli sauce, garlic and Manchurian in them!

I think Indian Chinese dishes, like Manchurian, are terrific – they're one of the earliest fusion dishes to emerge here. Today, a Michelin-star restaurant in London serves gobi Manchurian. This makes me happy – it's so Indian.