



An Indian Fin(n)ish

AMIT MEHRA



What happens if two ace chefs — one Indian, the other Finnish — decide to pair up in the kitchen?

SHANTANU DAVID

IT WAS in 2010 that Samuli Wirgentis, Head Chef at Helsinki's Michelin-starred Postres, first visited India. "I ate the food here and was blown away. It was so different from the Indian food in Finland. I wanted to learn more about the cuisine and started asking around about it," he says. His interest led him to Veen, a Finnish mineral water company, who got him in touch with contemporary Indian food's poster boy, Manish Mehrotra. Thus was born Veen Connect, a culinary event that brings together chefs from different parts of the world. Veen Connect made its Indian debut this month, with Mehrotra flying to Helsinki to showcase Indian food two weeks ago. Wirgentis is doing the same in Delhi at present.

It was an eye-opener for Mehrotra and Wirgentis, both novices in each other's cuisines. For his five-day visit to Postres, Mehrotra served classics from his Delhi-based restaurant Indian Accent, such as Potato Spherical Chaat and John Dory Moilly without diluting the spice content at all. "While Scandinavia doesn't traditionally consume a lot of spice, people were really open to the robust flavours of India. Thai cuisine is really big in Finland right now and I think that once some decent Indian eateries open shop there, Indian will become really big as well," says Mehrotra with a laugh.

Both chefs had a great time in each other's geographies, but there were of course some bugbears. While Mehrotra wished for his *tandoor* in which he cooks his kulchas, Wirgentis missed some Scandinavian ingredients. "Sorrel is something not available in India, so I had to substitute it with rocket leaves," laments Wirgentis.



(Clockwise from above) Indian Accent Kitsch-Ree; Charcoal-grilled Lamb with Broccoli, Oysters and Cabbage; the chefs

While the six-course menu in Helsinki had four Indian dishes and two Finnish ones, the menu being served at Indian Accent is vice-versa.

The meal begins with Nordic Flavors, a beguilingly simple medley of potato spheres, dill and brown butter, and that's it. Despite containing only three ingredients, the dish is impossibly rich. This is followed by Hay Smoked Scallops with Grilled Fennel, Sorrel (er, rocket leaves), and Fennel Pollen. The scallops retain their strong seafood flavour and are a further lesson on Scandinavian minimalism in food, wherein the focus is on a few ingredients. Wirgentis is a firm believer in this tradition. "I don't like to have more than five ingredients in any dish that I serve," he says.

This is in direct contradiction to Indian cuisine and its enviable pantheon of spices. Interestingly, the next course, the penultimate Finnish one, a Charcoal Grilled Lamb with Broccoli and Cabbage, is an explosion of flavours with the medium-rare lamb marinated in salt-preserved lemons.

After this Scandinavian simplicity, it's India's turn to bat. Mehrotra's first dish is a Malai Corn Fritter served on a bed of Sarson ka Saag, sprinkled with White Butter Popcorn. We polish off every morsel, mindful of the trouble we'll get into at home given that we've never consumed spinach. In any form.

Next up is the Indian Accent Kitsch-Ree, a sinful concoction of khichdi, bacon, chicken nuts and burnt garlic, the epitome of comfort foods. Khichdi will never be the same again. Dessert is simply Finnish again, comprising a Strawberry Parfait with crumbled cookies, whipped cream and grape ice (frozen pure grape juice). The tart berries and grapes nestling among cookies and cream are the icing on the cake.

Veen Connect is on at Indian Accent for lunch and dinner till Sunday. Meal per person is Rs 3,500 (exclusive of taxes and alcohol). Contact: 4323515.