

Top Table

James Brennan talks to the Indian chef aiming to change the way the world perceives his country's cuisine

Manish Mehrotra is a man on a mission. Not content with opening a New York outpost of his New Delhi restaurant Indian Accent last year, the 43-year-old chef now has his sights set on London. The goal: to bring his internationally attuned Indian cuisine to a global audience and to do it with style.

Opened in 2009, the original Indian Accent was recently ranked 78th best restaurant in the world for its take on traditional Indian food. But while Mehrotra has his eyes on some prime locations in Mayfair and Knightsbridge for its latest iteration, the bigger picture involves showcasing to the world a cuisine he feels has been misrepresented outside India.

"Everybody thought we were a country of just curry and naan bread, which is not true," he says with a hint of exasperation. "Even chefs who started cooking 'real' Indian food got confused between India as a land of spices and India as a land of chilli. But



LONDON, ENGLAND



I want to tell the world India is a land of spices, not chillies. We believe in spice blends and flavours in the dish rather than numbing your mouth with a whole bunch of chillies."

He has a point. Along with the tomato and potato, the chilli pepper is a relative newcomer to the dinner tables of the subcontinent. Its introduction to India by Portuguese traders in the 15th century had a powerful impact on an already ancient and complex cuisine, proving that globalisation was just as potent a force then as it is today. The story of Indian food has been shaped by Persian, Arabian, British, European and Chinese influences. Now Mehrotra is reimagining Indian food in a modern fine-dining context and sending it back out into the world.

"You can say it's modern Indian food but it's more like inventive Indian food," he says. "They are the same dishes reinvented in a global manner – that's international ingredients and presentation style without compromising on traditional flavour or taste."

By the time the New York branch of Indian Accent opened in February last year, there was already a buzz about the place. "People had not seen anything like it before," says Mehrotra. "Firstly it was a different kind of Indian restaurant. We were the first to do one without biryani, kebabs, chicken tikka masala or saag paneer. It was completely different. The flavours were traditional but the presentation and ingredients were quite modern. We were the first ones to focus on seasonality."

The moment softshell crabs appeared in New York fish markets, they went on the menu. In a break with Indian tradition, beef was used instead of lamb in pathar kebabs with bone marrow nihari. And the kulcha stuffed with Peking duck and hoisin sauce, which ruffled so many feathers



in New Delhi when it first appeared, materialised in New York with pastrami and mustard. Indian Accent had picked up a New York drawl.

And so to London. Britain's long love affair with Indian food produced such delicacies as chicken tikka masala and the balti. Both dishes have become

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world famous. But while some purists shun these Anglo-Indian hybrids for their inauthenticity, Mehrotra isn't one of them. “When I used to work in London I stayed in Bow, which is quite near Brick Lane, so I have tried all those dishes,” he says. “I have never judged them as an Indian or as a chef so I didn't find anything offensive about them,” he says, adding that he has no plans to incorporate them into his London menu.

“When we get going it will be wonderful to do my take on a chicken madras or a Bombay aloo, which don't exist in India,” he says. But whatever Indian Accent's London menu has in store, Mehrotra's inquisitive nature is sure to shine through.

“What I do is explore more of Indian cuisine,” says Mehrotra. “Even in India, we have to explore more [as] a lot of people do not know about their own country. So rather than innovating, if we explore our own different parts of India, we can find thousands of dishes that can be served in a fine dining restaurant.”

Indian fine dining is still very much in its infancy. The likes of Vineet Bhatia and Atul Kochhar raised the bar when they earned Michelin stars in London in the early 2000s.

While they are still active and successful, it is a bold new generation of chefs such as Gaggan Anand (Gaggan, Bangkok), Srijith Gopinathan (Campton Place, San Francisco) and Mehrotra who are propelling Indian fine dining to the next level and new heights.



Anand's experimentation with Indian street food classics and molecular gastronomy are perhaps what's needed to propel Indian food into the same culinary stratosphere as Nordic or modern European food. Gaggan recently clinched seventh spot in the World's 50 Best Restaurants awards. But there remains a problem for chefs like Anand and Mehrotra. No matter how ingenious and sophisticated Indian cuisine in all its many forms can be, it still struggles to shake off its curry house image.

“Until now there is still not that much respect,” admits Mehrotra. “We are still considered [to be] a cheap, greasy, take-away kind of cuisine. It's not about the spices or the complex nature of Indian food – it's because it was not represented properly outside India. But things are changing now and in the last two years Indian cuisine is becoming more prominent and getting more respect.”

When it comes to changing the way the world sees Indian food, Mehrotra's mission has only just begun. 🍛



FIVE TO TRY

1. **Campton Place, San Francisco, US**

Californian meets Indian at this two-Michelin-starred groundbreaker in San Francisco. Executive chef Srijith Gopinathan's food combines the restraint and sophistication of European-influenced west coast cuisine with the subtle and ingenious flavours of the subcontinent, which makes this Taj Hotel restaurant well worth a detour.

2. **Gaggan, Bangkok, Thailand**

Named Asia's best restaurant for the last three years and the seventh best restaurant in the world, Gaggan takes an Indian street food aesthetic and gives it a molecular twist. A product of Ferran Adria's Barcelona research lab, chef Gaggan Anand plans to close the restaurant in 2020 and relocate to Japan so miss out at your peril.

3. **Lasan, Birmingham, UK**

Once hailed as the UK's best local restaurant by Gordon Ramsay, this gem of a progressive Indian in Birmingham's historic Jewellery Quarter enlivens choice British ingredients with authentic and exciting Indian flavours. Chef Aktar Islam has three other restaurants in the city, including an Argentine steakhouse but still finds the time for the occasional TV appearance.

4. **Masala Library, Mumbai, India**

You're just as likely to find liquid nitrogen and lecithin emulsifiers as cumin and coriander at this Indian in Mumbai. While chef Jiggs Kalra embraces all things molecular, he retains a firm grasp of his national cuisine, making membership of Masala Library a must.

5. **Quilon, London, UK**

Chef Sriram Aylur's focus may be on the food of India's southwest coast – from Goa to Kerala – but his outlook is thoroughly international at this St James' Court Hotel restaurant. Close attention to seafood and a combination of classic dishes and contemporary methodology have earned Quilon a much-deserved Michelin star.