

London will soon get an Indian Accent

Manish Mehrotra on the challenges of menu-writing for a foreign audience, ahead of the launch of the second international branch of Indian Accent



Manish Mehrotra at Indian Accent in Delhi. Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

Indian Accent at The Manor, tucked away in a corner of Delhi's Friends Colony neighbourhood, is chef Manish Mehrotra's stomping ground. He is currently apron-deep in the menu creation for the restaurant's next international outpost after New York, which opened in 2016. The London branch, which is due to open in the iconic neighbourhood of Mayfair in early October, will compete with the likes of Atul Kochhar's Benaras and Vineet Bhatia London. In an interview, Mehrotra takes us through the varied dining cultures of London and New York and the challenges presented by each market. Edited excerpts:

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The Indian Accent opened in New York to rave reviews. It seems that there is a lacuna in the number of restaurants serving imaginative Indian food. How did you address this gap?

We opened an outpost in New York after having spent eight years running the Indian Accent successfully in Delhi. We had a repertoire of dishes, which we could take to a global audience. New York is still an unexplored market in terms of inventive Indian food. Of course, Junoon and Tamarind Tribeca are there, but a city like New York could definitely accommodate more. Moreover, I feel that Indian Accent offers a very different take on Indian food.

Taking the restaurant to New York was very challenging. In contrast to London, the market there is less evolved when it comes to Indian cuisine. There is limited knowledge of regional flavours, which is not the case in London. In New York, restaurants claim to be modern Indian just because they use scallops and exotic vegetables like white asparagus which they turn into a *jalfrezi*. Indian Accent was the first restaurant that didn't have chicken tikka masala or biryani on the menu, which was a completely different experience for the New York diner. Having said that, New Yorkers are extremely enthusiastic about food and willing to explore and experiment.

Unlike New York, as you mentioned, London has an evolved dining culture, with people more receptive to layered Indian flavours. Is it, however, a saturated market?

I know there are a lot of excellent restaurants, with the chefs doing a fantastic job. But I still feel that London can afford more good restaurants. During our surveys in the city, I ate at all the restaurants and felt that my food was slightly different. Chefs in London, such as Vineet Bhatia, Atul Kochhar, Sriram Aylur, and now I, are all working towards a common goal, but in our own different ways.

You are now working in three different markets, which are at different stages in their perception of modern Indian cuisine. Which of these was the most challenging when it came to menu writing?

Menu writing for New York took us a long time. We had to keep asking ourselves how to structure the menu. When people go to an Indian restaurant there, they order *poppadums*, kebabs, bowls of curry and *dal*, and a big basket of *naans*. But they don't know how to eat this food: Should one eat *naan* with *dal* or the Kerala *meen moilee* with *dal*? Is *dal* a dip, a chutney or a side? When we started doing trials, we realized that people didn't know the combinations. We had to create that awareness while also thinking of ways to maintain that "Indianness". One had to write the menu in a way that people understood what we were serving, while reflecting the essence of the dish. That was a challenge, but I think we have tackled it well.

According to food critics, Indian Accent has worked because it has created a balance between traditional and modern. How challenging has that been?

That has been the toughest part. Either restaurants become too Western, where they tone down the food to a foreign palate, or too traditional, or, most of the time, they are too confused. There are a few rules that one must follow, the most important of which is never mixing two Indian cuisines in one dish. No *dhokla* in *makhani* sauce or Kashmiri *roganjosh* in Chettinad curry. Different flavours and techniques need to make sense and something traditional must be replaced with a traditional counterpart. Some flavours are universal, like pork ribs and sweet sauce. So we have brought that to life in our pork ribs with *meetha achaar*. We make this with mango *chundo achaar* and serve it with *aam papad*. Foreigners can relate to this combination. And people love it when you tell them stories of the *aam papad* candy that we ate in India while we were growing up and the memories of pickle being made in our homes.

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One of your signature dishes, the duck and hoisin sauce 'kulcha', transformed into a new avatar in New York with pastrami and mustard. Will you tweak your iconic dishes for the London menu too?

The pastrami and mustard *kulcha* was a tribute to New York City. I used to eat pastrami all the time at Katz's Deli, which was simply amazing. The only difference between my dish and Katz's is that theirs is served at room temperature while mine is a hot *kulcha*, which I brush with mustard butter. All our signature dishes will be in London as well. In New York, there is no à la carte menu, but a three- to four-course tasting menu. We are currently doing a study of the UK market on whether to keep à la carte or not.

How difficult has it been to work around supply-chain logistics?

In New York, for instance, seasonality is followed very strictly. Nothing frozen is used. However, there was a problem there of getting regular Indian ingredients. Kosher salt was not working in the dishes, so we had to scout around for Tata salt. There, it doesn't come in a 20kg bag. So we had to pay a premium for a small bag. Again, we needed Amul butter for the *naan* and *dalto* to get that savoury feel. We had to pay \$9.99 (around Rs640) for a small block. In Delhi, we give *churan* and Fatafat as a post-meal digestive. There we had to seriously hunt for these things. We are going to London armed with all these learnings.

And now, the Delhi restaurant is shifting out of The Manor to The Lodhi. Will that change the experience for diners?

We were particular about the kind of experience we wanted to give our diners. It's not just about food at Indian Accent, it's about the overall experience. Indian Accent will now move to The Lodhi in a much larger space, with three private dining rooms. The Lodhi is the intuitive expression of a contemporary, yet stylish and confident, India. This space will be about personal journeys and discovery for guests.