

After taking New Delhi and New York by storm, Manish Mehrotra's Indian Accent to debut in London



There's a bagful of kidney-shaped orange sweets, the kind many of us may remember from our childhood, in chef Manish Mehrotra's kitchen. None of these will go into any fancy plates at Indian Accent, the restaurant Mehrotra presides over, with outlets in New Delhi and New York. Yet, they are vital to his work.

"These are my brain food. They help me think," he says. For the next few weeks, these are likely to get exhausted pretty fast. Mehrotra and his team are finalising their menu for Indian Accent's next outpost, which opens in London this autumn.

Given that London is not just one of the most influential global dining capitals but also an immensely sophisticated market for Indian food — far ahead of New York though it is silly to claim, as some do, that it has better Indian food than India — Indian Accent's foray will be much scrutinised. How the restaurant, often regarded as the face of modern Indian gastronomy, is received in London will define how the story of Indian cuisines plays out globally.

The London debut is also likely to pave the way for other Indian restaurant companies there.



Tofu Medu Vada

Naturally, there's a fair bit of curiosity about what Mehrotra is going to dish out: Is it going to be different from Delhi and New York? How different? Since I have pretty much invited myself over to a trial of some of the dishes, I manage to get the first look of the new menu. There's an unexpected aloo tikki that turns out to be mousselike while still retaining its chaat pedigree.



Aloo Tikki Chaat

There's chicken curry terrine that Mehrotra feels will do well in Europe, and there are ideas like a delicious tofu medu vada and kathal with podi in a coconut sauce et al. Over the next few days, these will be twisted, turned and fitted into proper dishes.



Beetroot and Peanut Butter chops with goat's cheese raita

Then, there are the Indian Accent stars — pork ribs with meetha achar and dal Moradabadi — that will go on to the new menu as well. How London takes to these layered, detailed dishes which have such a resonance at home will be a test for the restaurant as well as the maturity of the London market itself — how receptive is it to Indian food from India.



Prawn Pani Puri

Make in India In the past two-three years, the Indian food scene in London has exploded. Instead of generic curries, regional Indian flavours are trending and there is a move towards a mainstreaming of casually dished out yet nuanced food, remarkably different from the kind of Indian that London restaurants cooked earlier.



Dal Moradabadi

Trattorias that the European crowd never associated with Indian food are now linked with it and there has been a spurt in cafes and bars serving street food. The other big trend is regional Indian food.



Lemon Rice

A host of chefs is researching community-based and lesser known cuisines from the Subcontinent. London's inherent cosmopolitanism means it is now waking up to the complexity and diversity of flavours beyond stodgy, chilli-fuelled "curry", robust flavours of Punjabi-Pakistani dishes and the generic spicing on delicate salmon tikkas that a clutch of modern Indian upscale restaurants attempted in the past decades.



Kolhapuri Chaap

British-Indian chef and cookbook writer Manju Malhi says: "A few years ago, going to an Indian restaurant meant being served food with spices that are used in Indian cooking regardless of regional or finer variations. Dishes would often be labelled as North Indian Chicken Curry or Keralan Fish Curry. Now, many UK consumers are familiar with the cuisines of India and possibly the regions that particular dishes come from. Even convenience meals in supermarkets are now more varied."



This appreciation of nuance means the culture surrounding regional dishes has become important. "For example, more Londoners know about eating samosas at tea time as opposed to eating them as a starter in a main meal although that is still quite popular," adds Malhi.

Chef Atul Kochhar (**in pic below**) of Benares, which opened in 2003, confirms this change. "The main change is in the attitude of diners towards Indian cuisine. They have become savvier and better travelled. Indian food is having its moment, it is very trendy right now," he says.

Indian food may have gone mainstream, yet, big restaurant companies from Delhi and Mumbai, responsible for defining how we eat out, have not opened outposts in this exciting market. Most restaurateurs, investors and chefs driving new Indian in the isles are British-Indians or those with their base in the UK. Indian Accent's advent is set to change that.

Though the restaurant is to come up in the place of its sister brand Chor Bizarre, a long-standing SoHo restaurant (by the same parent company Old World Hospitality), it will be the first contemporary Indian brand making a foray into London's competitive arena. There are others with similar plans. London is perceived as a lucrative market because while rents are not too different from what restaurants land up paying for prime real estate in Mumbai and Delhi, the size of the market and propensity ..

Speciality Restaurants' Anjan Chatterjee points out that in a market such as London, "five times more people come to eat out than in India". It is also estimated that revenue from a restaurant in Delhi or Mumbai is just half or one-third of what the same restaurant could potentially earn in London.

So, this autumn, we are going to see the first trickle of upscale Indian restaurant brands from India into central London. Indian Accent aside, Speciality Restaurants is taking Oh! Calcutta there — in a tweaked format, emphasising the colonial connection. Restaurateur AD Singh, too, is readying to take one of his brands into this market. The Leela opened Jamavar in Mayfair earlier this year but led by London veteran and former Gymkhana chef Rohit Ghai.

However, London comes with its own set of challenges. Rents in central London have been going up, thanks to a retail upswing. Apparently, one of the factors contributing to Indian Accent's move into the Chor Bizarre space (located next to a Tiffany's outlet) is the spiralling rent — hard for a traditional, lower-priced restaurant to keep up with.

Then, there are labour issues. "Finding suitable Indian chefs and staff is the single biggest problem in London," says Mehrotra, who is training foreign staff — at least two Londoners, with no background in Indian cooking — in his kitchen in New Delhi. They will shore up the team in London. Hiring chefs, at least at junior levels, from India is unviable because of visa requirements, and labour from other European countries has become a challenge post Brexit.



The Evolution of Indian Though Britain has always had a connect with Indian food, thanks to several waves of immigration from the Subcontinent (post 1947 and then after the Bangladesh war in 1971), and eating curry has been a longstanding British ritual, over the last five years, the Indian food scene has evolved dramatically.

The watershed moment was the opening in 2010 of Dishoom — a chain of cafes, at least initially inspired by the old Irani cafes of Mumbai (though now chole bhatura and different takes of pop dishes appear on its menu).

With its vada pav, naan rolls, eggs kejriwal and more, Dishoom turned several paradigms on their head. Before it appeared, it was possible to divide “Indian” restaurants in London into three main categories: curry houses often run by Bangladeshi immigrants, fine dines usually focusing on Punjabi/ tandoori food, and formal “modern Indian” restaurants (often dubbed “Frenchified”) with European feel, good wine lists, using local ingredients and subtle Indian spicing to appeal to a European palate. ..

With Dishoom, the Indian café came into its own — not aspiring to any Michelin star, serving flavours not tweaked for the European palate and serving food within a cultural context, with a clear story. The success of the chain set the tone for a host of similar contemporary, self-assured bars and cafes taking the new Indian story forward.

From the upscale Gymkhana to Hoppers that heroes the Sri Lankan dish as well as its cousin dosa (both restaurants are by the JKS Group, among London’s most prominent restaurateurs); from Gunpowder and Madame D’s (a new Himalayan restaurant in Spitafields) to Cricket (by two non-Indian Londoners) and Talli Joe, all the current darlings of the British-Indian food scene have distinct stories and characters. Yet, the underpinnings are similar.

A younger cosmopolitan audience is lured with interesting bars (India-inspired cocktails and gin and tonics), small plates and casual bites that do not apologise for “real” flavours. Provenance and regional ingredients are played up so that even Cricket, whose chef and restaurateur have no India connect save that the chef worked in Mumbai, have dishes like Telangana beef pickle and kashundi mackerel.

At Talli Joe, chef Sameer Taneja (**in pic below**) takes care of the finer nuances of his dishes and has put the likes of sorpotel with sannas on his menu — hard to come by even in bars in India.



He points out: "People are now aware of dishes from different communities. They know that Sindhi kadhi is different from Punjabi kadhi. Saag aloo has disappeared from menus." Taneja says people are now looking for more depth in food.

This change in awareness is being recognised all over.

At Benares, Kochhar is incorporating dishes inspired by family recipes of his staff. At the highly regarded Quilon, which earned a Michelin star in 2008 and has kept it ever since, chef Sriram Aylur (**in pic below**) observes the drastic change from 1999 when he first came to London to open his restaurant. "I had a diner who told me, 'I liked your food but I wish you had real Indian food like naan here.' Today, diners are more aware and go into the specifics of each dish and ask us about finer spices like mace and star anise," he says.



South Indian cuisines and flavours not known in Britain till a few years ago are trending and Aylur says this phenomenon of Indian cuisines getting into the mainstream is perceptible even outside London.

Unlike India, which can be fad-driven, London restaurateurs say segmentation is clear in the market. "People are aware of different levels and kinds of food and the same diners choose to go to different restaurants on different days," says Karan Gokani who runs the popular Hoppers, with an average wait of 45 minutes. With Indian Accent poised to make its debut now at the top end of this market, will the excitement over Indian rev up even more? We will wait and watch.