

Meet Manish Mehrotra, the chef who's got the world eating Indian



Chef Manish Mehrotra strikes a pose for an exclusive Brunch cover shoot (Rohit Chawla)

His not-so-modest eatery is the only one from India to be featured in the coveted World's 50 Best Restaurants list. In celebration, chef Manish Mehrotra takes us to Old Delhi and traces the flavours that make Indian cuisine a global favourite

Saturday morning, 9.30 am. The rest of the city may still be snoozing from the aftermath of a late Friday night. But Old Delhi is already abuzz. A scooter carrying its rider, his wife and three kids, zips in from the wrong direction, brushing past us by inches. A tuk tuk bursting at the seams with passengers honks maliciously, as if to say that we're trespassing on its territory. "Damn! No rules apply here, no?" says chef Manish Mehrotra, 42, sidestepping a cycle rickshaw-wallah, whose stunts can rival even Rajinikanth's.

Mehrotra is, as *Brunch* columnist Vir Sanghvi put it, "the most exciting modern Indian chef in the world today". His Delhi-based restaurant Indian Accent has become the only Indian restaurant to feature in the prestigious The World's 50 Best Restaurants list this year. "It's a relief to see at least one name from India among the world's best... especially, when we have such a rich food culture," Mehrotra says. "But it's not just another feather in my cap, it's also another weight on my shoulder. Your level of expectation from me goes up one more notch now. To satisfy that expectation day after day is a very tough job."

The recently-opened New York outlet of his restaurant is also raking in the ratings and rave reviews already. But when you're trying to zig zag your way through the meandering lanes of Old Delhi, even the greatest chef in India can get just a little baffled – and very amused!

When we finally arrive at the famed and overhyped Parathe Wali Gali, Mehrotra pauses for a moment to peep into one of the large frying pans. A stuffed round parantha is swiftly dropped into the piping oil, and as it sizzles, we make our way deeper into the lane, past the stack of little parantha joints. The other shops here are yet to pull up their shutters, but street vendors selling vegetables, spices, tea and kachoris have begun to swiftly occupy their favourite spots on the lane.

At one such vendor, Mehrotra halts and picks up a handful of tiny, unusual seeds. “What is this, boss?” he asks. “Yeh lehsun hai babuji, ek kali ka lehsun.” Mehrotra peels one of the single pod garlic and takes a sniff, reeling back almost immediately. “Whoa! This is super strong,” he exclaims, looking excited. “It’s going to make some brilliant garlic-infused oil. Sau gram dena bhaisaab.” From another vendor down the lane, he picks up a bunch of colocasia or arbi leaves. “Maharashtrians and Gujaratis make a dish with this, sort of a leaf roulade,” he says, giving me a quick recipe of the dish.



Chef Manish Mehrotra at his restaurant kitchen

All in the roots

Mehrotra’s extensive knowledge of vegetables and their myriad uses comes from his upbringing in a shuddh vegetarian household. He was born and brought up in Patna in a big joint family; his father owned a petrol pump, mother was a homemaker. But his grandmother ruled the kitchen. “There were a lot of rituals during her time,” he says. “Before cooking dinner, she’d bathe, wear a special saree that

she'd have made in Banaras, do puja and then start making dinner. Nobody was allowed in the kitchen. It was only when she passed away that my mother and aunts took over."

Onion and garlic were strict no-nos, but "we had the freedom to eat anything outside, including non-veg". Growing up in a vegetarian household instilled in him the appreciation of the fact that vegetables can be delicious too and can be made into a variety of dishes.

"We Indians have such pre-conceived stereotypes about our own food," he says. "For instance, we think Bengalis eat only fish. But you can't imagine how well they do vegetables and such a huge variety of them too! We're quite ignorant when it comes to our own cuisines." He asserts that as a chef, you don't even need to invent dishes – you just need to travel across India to explore them.

During one such trip through Moradabad in Uttar Pradesh, Mehrotra came across Dal Muradabadi – sold as a snack by hawkers on cycles, and often served with chutney and papdi or jalebi. He loved it so much that he put it in his menu, with a little twist – by adding some crisp moong dal and serving it with flaky bread with parmesan cheese. "The good thing is that the Indian palate is evolving and our cuisine is moving forward. So a lot of traditional dishes which were lost or are in the process of being lost, are being revived now in modern avatars," he says. But he also believes that you can't arrive at modern Indian cuisine without having your roots in tradition intact.



Old Delhi's famed Paranthé Wali Gali (Saumya Khandelwal)

The art and its science

We arrive at the legendary Natraj for their even more legendary dahi bhalla. “It’s been a while since I have had their dahi bhalle,” Mehrotra says, in anticipation. Unluckily, the hole-in-the-wall shop is still shut, so we go to the Haldiram’s next door instead for a quick walk-through of its colourful displays of sweets.

“Making mithai is an art and a science,” Mehrotra says. “You talk about science in molecular gastronomy, but few have any idea how much science goes into the making of a traditional mithai! We take a lot of inspiration for our desserts from mithai shops.” Take Indian Accent’s doda barfi treacle tart, for instance. Or besan laddoo cheesecake, for that matter.

Mehrotra reminisces that back home in Patna, nothing was store bought, not even mithais. “Everything was made in-house – pickles, jams, jellies, squash, murabbas, snacks, mathris, papdis...”

Food may have been an integral part of his growing up years, but the decision to become a chef didn’t stem from that. “Many chefs would tell you that they were inspired by their grandmothers or that they’d cook with their mom in the kitchen as a child. I did nothing of the sort. It was a simple career decision to do hotel management – I just didn’t want to sit in a petrol pump and sell petrol all day, that’s all.”

Mehrotra’s first tryst with professional cooking began with Pan Asian, which helped him break the rigidity and rules of an Indian kitchen later in life. “Because I didn’t learn to make a kebab or butter chicken in the specific way they’re made, I could interpret them my way. I had no mental block. Plus exposure to different types of ingredients in Pan Asian helped me break the boundaries and restrictions of Indian cuisine.”

Which is why when Indian Accent was conceptualised, the first trial menu had items like galawti kebab with foie gras, red snapper moilee and Chawanprash cheesecake. “Now when I see my first menu, I laugh,” he says. “I’m still reading, travelling, learning, innovating, evolving.”

Not just another gimmick

We decide to give Khari Baoli, the spice market of Old Delhi, a miss. And instead head through Dariba Kalan, the silver market, towards Gali Kababian – that gorgeous lane of biryani and kebab-selling shops where the tried-and-tested Karim’s and Al Jawahar are located.

At Dariba, the twinkling silver jewellery in glass cabinets fails to draw the chef’s attention. His interest is instead drawn to a vegetable vendor selling a mound of berries. “This is karonda. Iska chutney, achar, murabba banta hai,” he says, adding with a smirk, “Now they’re sold in India as fresh cranberries.”

Mehrotra remembers when, as a child, he and his siblings would accompany his cousin to her dance class. “While she’d learn how to dance, we’d be pillaging the nearby karonda bushes and eating the berries raw.” Such memories of home, of his years in Mumbai as a student, of his travels across the world later, have inspired many of his dishes at the Indian Accent. His cuisine may be categorised as fusion, but Mehrotra says he doesn’t fuse dishes without reason. He insists that every dish should have a story behind it.

Take the popular soy keema served with a quail egg and lime leaf buttered pav at his New York restaurant, for instance. “Soy keema used to be made at home in Patna regularly, as it was a vegetarian household. Then later during my college days in Bombay, we’d grab a plate of keema ghotala pav at Dadar station before rushing off for classes. So those two stories, the memories, the two dishes came together in the creation of this dish.”

But how does he know when to stop with his experiments in fusing elements from different dishes together? “You can’t go overboard, you’ve to keep it simple, make sure that whoever is eating the food – whether they are Indian or a global guest – should relate to it at some level. And that the ultimate rule is not compromised – that the food is not just another gimmick but is actually tasty.”

For now, having completed the last leg of our morning walk through Old Delhi, Mehrotra is already envisioning his next creation. Inspired by the pile of offal being sold at a corner of Gali Kababian, the chef is looking forward to putting goat brain in his menu next.

“Brain, when done well, is like butter in texture. I think it’ll make for a marvellous dish,” he says, adding with the politeness that you’ve come to associate with him, “This tour was long overdue. It’s been a wonderful experience!”

A tribute to his mentor, Ananda Solomon



(Vidya Subramanian)

My first job after college was with Taj President and I was fortunate that I got to work under Ananda Solomon at the Thai Pavilion. The first day we met him, he told us that if we wanted to make it big, we must forget everything – love life, social life – for the first two-three years, at least. And just completely immerse ourselves in work. We used to go to work in the morning and leave at night. Solomon himself was such a dedicated person. Sundays used to be his day off, so we would be very excited. But lo and behold, there comes in chef with a newspaper tucked under his arm. He'd drive all the way from Malad to Cuffe Parade even on a Sunday! His dedication was amazing. He was a terror too, we used to be scared of him.

But we learnt a lot – the really hard way too. I used to grate 70 coconuts, every single day. After six months, I could've challenged anyone in grating coconuts. So we learnt everything very hands-on. And not just cooking, with Ananda Solomon, we really learnt how to guess psychology, read guests' minds, how to judge their needs.

But the best part was that he could recognise people's potentials. When you are the leader of a team, you should know the potential of each of your team members and use them in the best way. If someone is good at batting, you can't ask him to bowl at a crucial moment. That was what Ananda Solomon was so good at. He truly was a gem of the industry. Now that he has retired, we'll miss him dearly!

Ask Chef Mehrotra: Why does street food often taste better than five-star food?



(HT Archives)

Because, I guess, on the street, people aren't so conscious about making mistakes. Also, many times I find that good street food vendors are perfectionists as they do one thing over and over for many years. In a five-star restaurant, we do 10 different things and as the saying goes, we're probably Jack of all, master of none. But the street food vendor is a master of one and he does it perfectly. Then of course, there's the fact that you pay way less for street food!

From the reporter's notebook



Mehrotra walks through Old Delhi clicking photos of interesting ingredients (like goat brain!); (above, right) here he is striking a pose for the cover shot (Satarupa Paul)

The horizon had only just started to light up when I dragged myself out of bed and to Golcha cinema hall in Daryaganj. "You're late!" Rohit Chawla, the photographer who shot our cover photo, said to me annoyed. I looked at my watch; I was late alright – by exactly seven minutes! From behind him, chef Manish Mehrotra came out of the car, wearing his chef's jacket, his eyes puffy from lack of sleep, but his smile big and warm, and almost apologetic. "Don't mind Rohit. He's tough on everyone," he tells me conspiratorially – even as Chawla goes about, at lightning speed, getting hold of a rickshaw wallah, arranging a cup of tea and a plate of bedmi puri to act as props.

Sitting atop the red rickshaw, with the imposing Jama Masjid in the background, chef Mehrotra sincerely obeys the swift commands that Chawla throws at him for the perfect cover shot. An hour later, having changed into a printed shirt and a pair of Lennon sunglasses to complete the look, Mehrotra sits with me at a coffee shop in Connaught Place. We're biding our time, drinking coffee, nibbling on sandwiches, waiting for the shops in Chandni Chowk to open – so we can go back to walk our planned flavour trail through the old, other Dilli. And then in true foodie fashion, the greatest chef in India today tells me, "This sandwich is no good. We should've had a couple of plates of those delicious smelling bedmi puri, instead!"

So we head back to Old Delhi. For bedmi puri. And then some more!

From HT Brunch, July 31, 2016