

Curry no more



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AUGUST 11, 2017 17:11 IST
 UPDATED: AUGUST 11, 2017 18:32 IST



When power chefs redefine luxury Indian dining abroad, with high quality local produce, modern technique and an upscale setting

“The French respect their cuisine and therefore their chefs get respect. We’ve always taken food in India for granted, but now that is changing,” quips chef Sriram Aylur of the London-based Michelin-star restaurant Quilon. Aylur and I have been talking about the evolution of Indian luxury dining, how the image of our food has shifted from cheap curry to trendy luxe, and about the rise of globally-influential Indian chefs.

From New York to Dubai, Sydney to London, modern Indian restaurants are pushing the envelope, marrying high quality local produce with regional flavours, and managing to command top dollars for a cuisine once seen as stodgy “curry”. As younger, more cosmopolitan audiences get set to learn about spices beyond chilli, and try small plates of top quality pork ribs with achar, venison kebab, British Columbia’s Ruby trout in coconut sauce and more, Indian luxury dining is all set to trend the Japanese or Peruvian way.

At a premium

Connoisseurs who appreciate the complexity and diversity of Indian cuisines are ready for a spot of fine dining. When Indian Accent, India’s top restaurant brand, opened in New York last year for instance, it raised the bar not just with regard to the food but also vis-à-vis price points. At \$120 per head for its tasting menu, this is the priciest Indian menu in New York, upping the ante from previous benchmarks at Junoon, where prices range around \$70 per head. That New York – where the average meal costs \$ 48.5 per head, as per Zagat – has been willing to pay that much for an Indian dining experience shows how the image of our food has changed.

This fall, when Indian Accent opens its London outpost, all eyes will once more be on its presiding deity, chef Manish Mehrotra, whose instinctive flair and sense of rootedness is hard to match. His kind of nuanced food married with the luxury of plump European produce will certainly command a premium.

If food represents a country’s soft power, Indian cuisine’s dramatic makeover means that Brand India is on a roll, catapulting a handful of chefs to stardom.

Star in the kitchen

Mehrotra is headed for global acclaim, but chefs like Vikas Khanna and Gaggan Anand are already the poster-boys of our cuisine. Though Khanna is now focussed entirely on his celebrity appearances and brand endorsements, his role in Indian cuisine’s image makeover is undeniable. In the midst of making appearances everywhere from the White House to Cannes, he is now in the process of completing the shoot for his biopic, *Buried Seeds*, directed by the American-Russian filmmaker Andrei Severny. The documentary revolves around the immigrant life of the chef from Amritsar, and its significance lies beyond personal brand building. Any cuisine’s popularity today is impacted by the popularity of its star chefs, and the consumption of their stories – the reason why series like *Chef’s Table* on Netflix are popular.



The other flag-bearer of Brand India internationally is, of course, Bangkok-based Gaggan Anand, whose eponymous restaurant continues to feature on the World’s 50 Best List. Though Anand plans to shut Gaggan by 2020, he has been making savvy investments to widen his sphere of influence.

This year, Garima Arora, a Noma and Gaggan alumna, opened Gaa in a former brothel, where she serves tapas based on local produce, fermentation and foraging. Arora is the first alumna to be backed by Gaggan. There are plans to open other restaurants (Raa and Sol) with two other protégées. If the Noma alumni mainstreamed the Rene Redzepi school, Gaggan seems set on the same path.

Regional rules

One of the most influential Indian chef internationally, Floyd Cardoz changed the way Indian food was perceived in New York with *Tabla*, the Danny Meyer restaurant. Last year, he opened *Paowalla* in SoHo, highlighting food he believes in: small plates, casual bites, cooked with local ingredients. Regional Indian food, relatively unknown to the world at large, is another form of luxury and millennials given to “experiences”, not prices, are lapping it up. “Americans are adventurous and many are now eating new dishes not seen in the West - fish *reachado*, *sorpotol*, *pao* and *choriz*,” Cardoz says.

In London, while older stalwarts that defined luxury dining remain – Camellia Panjabi’s *Masala World Group*, Atul Kochhar’s *Benares*, and more – chefs like Talli Joe’s Sameer Taneja are cooking *sorpotel-sanna*, lamb chops with *Kolhapur* masala and finding a cooler, mainstream audience for this food. “The idea is to cook traditional flavours with the best available ingredients. We get excellent bone with marrow here, so I do a slow-cooked nalli which does well as bar food,” says Taneja.