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Indian Accent Chef Breaks Culinary Boundaries With New York Location

Indian Accent is a Delhi restaurant that does creative fusion twists on Indian classics. Think blue cheese naan or a traditional Indian stuffed crepe filled with hoisin duck. NPR's Ari Shapiro talks to the executive chef and creative mastermind Manish Mehrotra about opening his new location in New York.

Transcript

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

Earlier this year I was in New Delhi and heard about a restaurant doing something pretty extraordinary for India. In a country where the food already has huge regional variations, this restaurant is flinging the doors open way beyond national boundaries.

This is a spot where the traditional Indian bread called naan is baked with blue cheese. A martini is infused with masala spices. And in a familiar Indian street food snack made with yogurt, this restaurant uses Italian burrata instead. The food is all served in a refined, elegant setting like a stylish living room. The restaurant is called Indian Accent.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: (Speaking Hindi).

SHAPIRO: The man who created this restaurant grew up with strict culinary boundaries.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: The main brain behind the Indian Accent is chef Manish Mehrotra.

MANISH MEHROTRA: Manish Mehrotra's family was vegetarian. More than that, his family belonged to the Jain religion, so they did not eat onions, garlic, leeks or scallions. In his New Delhi kitchen, the culinary shackles are off. One of the chefs is showing us around.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: At the moment, they are preparing the cornettos - duck cornetto or the (unintelligible) cornetto.

SHAPIRO: It's a little savory ice cream cone filled with either duck or eggplant. The New York Times called Manish Mehrotra one of the most admired chefs in India. But when I visited New Delhi, he was away opening his newest restaurant on the other side of the planet. So I went to find him.



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(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SHAPIRO: OK, now we are 7,000 miles away from New Delhi. We've arrived in Manhattan to see the new New York outpost of Indian Accent. Here it is.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SHAPIRO: The inside is more glamorous and sleeker than the original restaurant in Delhi. The kitchen is twice as big. And Chef Mehrotra is already embracing new ingredients in this city. For example, Indian restaurants typically don't serve beef. It's against the Hindu religion.

I heard one item on the menu here that is very different from India is - you have pastrami and mustard in one of your dishes.

MEHROTRA: (Speaking Hindi).

SHAPIRO: He shouts an order in Hindi to one of his chefs. He brought them from New Delhi to make sure the food was just right.

MEHROTRA: Last year I was here three times, meeting the suppliers, roaming around the local markets. And I tried the pastrami. Then we started here, and Carnegie Deli was next door - so pastrami kulcha - yeah. Why not? Why not?

SHAPIRO: This is fresh out of the tandoor. This is a stuffed thin bread with a pink layer of pastrami in the middle.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SHAPIRO: Oh, wow.

Kulcha is a traditional stuffed Indian bread. The pastrami and mustard filling is anything but traditional.

MEHROTRA: These are traditional dishes but given a twist in our kitchen. So in a true sense, we invented - reinvented all these dishes again to make this Indian cuisine a global cuisine.

SHAPIRO: His definition of Indian food is loose. It might include Peking Duck or jalapeno peppers.

MEHROTRA: Indian food is not about cooking authentic dishes. It's about flavor. And if you put a little bit flavor in any of your dishes, that is Indian flavors.



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SHAPIRO: And in the six months you've lived here, what is the biggest surprise, the biggest thing you've learned about cooking food for American guests?

MEHROTRA: We used to think that Americans cannot eat chilies, but they can. They can.

SHAPIRO: Have any of your guests come in and said, I know it's not on the menu, but may I please order chicken tikka masala?

MEHROTRA: Yes, many times.

SHAPIRO: Really?

MEHROTRA: And I go and tell them, Sir, I love eating it, but I'm sorry. We won't be able to do it for you.

SHAPIRO: He wants to expand what people think of when they imagine Indian food. He says there are more than 400 types of bread from India. Why not try something other than naan, like a crispy dosa, a pancake from South India?

MEHROTRA: Everybody eats pancake from China to Japan to Europe to America. Everybody eats pancake. But they don't know about my dosa, which is such a wonderful pancake.

SHAPIRO: What he's doing here at Indian Accent is high-end - \$90 for four courses. But he says you can apply the same principles at home. Put your leftover tandoori chicken into a sandwich. Add an Indian spice mix to an omelette. The question isn't whether it's something that people in New Delhi would typically eat. The question is whether it's something you want to eat.