

SENSUOUS PALATE

As chefs, gourmets and foodies embark on a wild, sensory exploration, the Indian palate gets a stimulating makeover. Hunger for experimentation sees India in the grip of a funky, food explosion.

by Shefalee VASUDEV

SOMETHING STUNNING HAS happened to food in India. Gulgappas filled with vodka and prawns, spicy crab cake washed down with a chilled energy drink, chopped green chillies in vanilla ice cream. Alice in bizarre foodland or chefs hungering to snap the creativity barrier? In what is perhaps a collusion of the two, urban India is transforming into a kitchenette where roasts are works of art and desserts are funky statements, chocolates have a sensual appeal and experimentation is the flavour of the times. Food is no longer food as one ate it. It is a menu of sensuousness, delight, curiosity, appeal, vari-

ety and interaction. India is in the grip of an exciting explosion and food is a seductive new entrant. If Mumbai is the food capital, Delhi is hot on its heels, with other metros too discovering the wonders of exotic dining. Chefs, food designers, restaurateurs and caterers have given the plates and palates of Indians a makeover. From the overwhelming number of speciality restaurants to cuisine choices even in Mumbai's tiffin dabbas, food trends are simmering.

"Food is now celebrated as a one-stop indulgence of the five senses," says Mumbai-based culinary writer and expert Rashmi Uday Singh. "Even Chennai has mind-boggling varieties from Syrian Christian food to Marwari cuisine, with caterers keeping their noses to the

ground for constant improvisation," she says. The workshops conducted by Uday Singh's Mumbai-based Good Food Academy attract hundreds of people. "It is like a gigantic tide that everybody wants to swim in," she says of the letters she gets in response to her food columns.

"There is a perceptible shift from traditional eating," agrees chef Ritu Dalmia of Delhi's Diva restaurant, popular for its Italian and global cuisine. The food explosion is a mix of demand and supply, says Dalmia. "It is a demand for and the availability of a variety of ingredients, vegetables, sauces and oils in India, a spillover effect of frequent globe trotting," she adds. But it's not just the much-travelled chefs who are tapping the food pulse. Entrepreneurs span peo-

ple like Jatin Phatak, a vendor at Mumbai's Chowpatty who quit the pau-bhaji Inc to sell karela juice and a "diabetic special" to joggers. Likewise, Jagmohan Desai, who has been selling vada-pau on Mumbai's Marine Drive for 14 years, admits people are ditching his fare for "exciting food". "Jisko dekho bawarchi bana phir raha hai (Everyone has turned into a chef)," he says.

Across the road, Manish Nambiar, executive chef of Oberoi Towers' new restaurant, India Jones, echoes a similar sentiment. "Eating out is a serious industry that's on an upward evolutionary graph," he says. He should know. Nambiar is behind the global menu at India Jones that has lured some of the country's most enthusiastic gourmets

GAUTAM PATODE

Table by the Sea

Uday Singh (right) and Chef Sheroy Kermani of Taj President, Mumbai, hold the catch of the season. For the real pick, dig out live seafood—lobsters, crabs, shrimp—stored in special water tanks at the Oberoi restaurant, India Jones.



CHOCOLAT

Photographs by FAWZAN HUSAIN



Naughty Chocolates

Indulge your wild-sweet desires, gobble down women's busts, champagne bottles, Barbie shoes, even Disneyland figures—all in chocolate designed by Khanna



Porcelain Princess

Gidwani's desserts are unusual, like this photocake with pictures of Hrithik Roshan and Aishwarya Rai

Chill Out Zone

The plain vanilla turns cool with hot, chopped green chillies spicing up the ice cream scoop. For zanier flavours head for Bachelor's ice cream parlour at Mumbai's Marine Drive.



NARENDRA BISHT



and celebrities. It is the only restaurant in India, claims Nambiar, which flies in fresh seafood from Kerala twice a week and stores it in specially designed water tanks. Guests walk into the modernistic kitchen, choose seafood from the tanks, and while they wait in the warm, wooden ambience, Nambiar whips up a "sensuous, delicious" meal.

FOOD isn't just fun, innovation and celebration. Designers have turned dining tables into canvases with colour themes and funky accessories. "Now, food is associated with lifestyle instead of just cooking," says chef Manisha Bhasin of Marriott's PanAsia, a far-eastern cuisine restaurant in Delhi. PanAsia has special Wednesday afternoons, where 45-50 women participate in a culinary show. "It is not just a cookery class," insists Bhasin. A helping of personality and fitness lessons or a fashion show, and it is a recipe for success.

What has also energised the burgeoning food industry is people's willingness to explore and that of the chefs to mould this urge. "Most people quickly pick up tips if they are trained to combine homegrown tastes with the menu," says Dalmia. "Good food is about catering to sentiments, and a fun element always adds to its appeal," agrees Amrish Arora,

Organic Orgy

Vitamin-packed health drinks and organic salads perk up the global menu prepared by Dalmia at Diva in Delhi. The most delicious starter may, however, be her warm laughter served at the Italian food joint.

food director of Mumbai's Fountain Inn. Arora, who introduced bite-sized desserts and cakes to Mumbai's party scene, recalls Scam Chicken, a freak recipe he introduced when Big Bull Harshad Mehta was arrested. As the restaurant was on Mumbai's Bankers' Street, it was a hit with the lunchtime crowd. "We never served what we promised in the recipe—that was the scam," says Arora.

The frothy, fun approach vibes well with the sensuality of food. So you have coloured chocolates in seductive shapes like champagne bottles, Barbie shoes and cartoon characters. Mumbai-based Shivani Khanna is one of the few Indian entrepreneurs dabbling in coloured chocolate (approved food grade colour painted on chocolates). Her speciality is chocolate erotica. "The women's busts we make in chocolate have become popular as naughty chocolates—a big favourite at bachelors' parties," she says.

Fun is the icing especially when it comes to cakes and desserts. Hiroo Gidwani, the entrepreneur behind Desserts

RUs in Mumbai, churns out photo cakes and satiny desserts that look like porcelain, and funny chocolate messages, some embellished with edible gold. "I once took a cake for Aishwarya Rai with her photo on it," says Gidwani, recalling how thrilled the actor was as she had never seen a photo cake. It's a cake that imprints a rice paper image of a real photograph and is completely edible.

Even the strictly vegetarian and conservative families are bored with traditional *khana*. So there is ample scope to reinvent vegetarian food, says Mumbai-based Panna Mehta of El-Lely's that

Lebanese Links

Mehta (below) and Pallavi Jhaveri of El-Lely's, Mumbai, were among the first to organise Lebanese food festivals in India. Falafel sandwiches and Lebanese bhel are now their bud-teaser specialities.

specialises in Lebanese food. Born and brought up in Sudan, Mehta was one of the first to organise a Lebanese food festival a few years ago. Now, between big orders for events with belly dancing thrown in, she caters to small gatherings too, providing falafel sandwiches and Lebanese bhel that sells like hot cakes.

CULINARY writer Karen Anand, author of *Lean Green Cuisine* and other cookery books, says the bigger shift is in cooking Indian food without ladles of oil. Indians still confuse health food with low calorie food, she says, "but I see more people warming up to less oily ways of doing *tadkas* for dals". Mumbai-based journalist Minal Khona, who reviews restaurants, recalls a baked ragda patty she had at a party. "Since it was baked with chutneys and ragda, it was a healthy, non-oily version of the good, old favourite." At Diva, besides colourful, health drinks like Power Pack with iron, vitamins and calcium, celery with grape squeeze, Dalmia has added organic food and salads with filling dips to her menu, 50 per cent of which is vegetarian.

Vegetarian fare is rising fast on the popularity charts, a fact corroborated by Raj Rao, food and beverages manager at Delhi's Oberoi who has worked abroad till now. "Fusion food is outdated in America unlike in India, where a lot of trends are being mixed," says Rao. Rightly so. Experimental food cannot shrug off the fusion label. "It is more confusion than fusion," says Nambiar who feels that the individual



FAWZAN HUSAIN

personality of cuisines is lost in fusion. "While there is a distinctive shift toward global cuisine, there is no escaping the popularity of dal *tadka*," says Delhi-based culinary expert Marut Sikka, who with food legend Jiggs Kalra has opened 23 speciality restaurants in India. "The challenge is to combine the traditional with a modernistic presentation. One should mix concepts rather than flavours," he adds.

Eating out or ordering in are not only about experimentation but also about history. Moksh in Bangalore, conceived by Kalra, ayurvedic food expert Pushpesh Pant and Sikka, is the first interactive pan-Indian vegetarian restaurant with an ayurvedic concept. "We serve old rediscovered recipes with

American Desi

Dal *tadka* and Chardonnay ... spicy Indian food and wine is a marriage made in heaven. It's the food concepts that should be mixed, not flavours and ingredients, says food expert Sikka.

traditionally ground ingredients based on ayurvedic principles," says owner P.V. Giri. Guests interact with chefs, choose ingredients, the cooking medium and even decide whether they want their food boiled, stir-fried or *handi* simmered.

And for those who like their foie gras from France and red wine from Bordeaux, the fine dining experience is catching on in India. It may be expensive, but an impressive wine list is a value addition some restaurateurs now boast of. "The only marriage made in heaven is the one between spicy Indian food and wine," says Mumbai-based wine expert Sanjay Menon of Sansula Wines. Adds Rao: "I advise guests to choose their wine and then match the food. Since Indian wine is being noticed, it may change the wine-dine dynamics."

Remember the dishy definition of a sandwich? Two slices of bread and a world of possibilities in between. It sums up the business of food. But dal *tadka* with Chardonnay? That's revolutionary. Try it.

—with Stephen David



HEMANT CHAWLA