

JUNE 2014

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BLACKBOOK

INDIA'S LUXURY INSIDER

indian accent
MANISH MEHROTRA

“ The future
of food will
be defined by
presentation ”

MANISH MEHROTRA

CORPORATE CHEF
LUXURY DINING DIVISION,
OLD WORLD HOSPITALITY

Manish Mehrotra, Corporate Chef—Luxury Dining Division, Old World Hospitality, recalls how during Indian Accent's first year of operations, the restaurant would lose a reservation a night because there was no butter chicken on the menu. Perplexed guests would ask the wait-staff, "What sort of Indian restaurant is this? You don't even serve *pappadoms* and *pyaaz*."

In the 2014 edition of Asia's Top 50 Restaurants, New Delhi's temple of 'inventive Indian' cuisine has risen in ranking by 12 notches, from 41 to 29, not a mean achievement for a five-year-old restaurant whose kitchen is constantly being raided by talent hunters. As Indian Accent's high priest, Mehrotra is sought out at every important international gastronomic powwow, from Varli's Chefs Showcase in New York City to the recently held international forum on The Future of Food in Singapore. And no A-list social event is complete without his culinary masterpieces. At Nita Ambani's 50th birthday celebration, held in Jodhpur last year, he served the

Orient Express at the Taj Palace, New Delhi and much before he attained stardom in Bangalore. But 77 floundered, its woes compounded by the fact that it did not have liquor license.

The next chef to try his hand at turning around the restaurant, renamed *Mushk*, was the Michelin star chef Vineet Bhatia from London, but Delhi just didn't warm up to his squid ink risotto-style seafood *khichdi* and *kala murgh*. The restaurant, as a result, was back to serving a multi-cuisine menu. That was till 2008, when Rohit Khattar's Old World Hospitality took over the management of the hotel and started working on a new restaurant concept. Mehrotra, who was in London, heading the kitchen at another Khattar venture, the pan-Asian restaurant Tamarai, volunteered to do the menu for the restaurant that was to be called Indian Accent.

It was an unusual leap of faith for a chef who had trained under the famous Ananda Solomon at the Thai Pavilion — Vivanta By Taj President in Mumbai and then evolved as a pan-Asian chef at Oriental Octopus at the India

the mood in the industry altered dramatically and Indian Accent was born in 2009.

Ask Mehrotra what distinguishes Indian Accent from the competition and he'll say that all the dishes served at the restaurant have been invented at its kitchen. "What I do is pull out the hidden treasures of Indian cuisine and give them a modern twist," says Mehrotra. "I take the old Bengali favourite, *khichdi* made with aromatic *gobindo bhog* rice, and turn it around by adding smoked sausages. If the world knows about risotto, why not *khichdi*? Our challenge is to elevate home-style cooking."

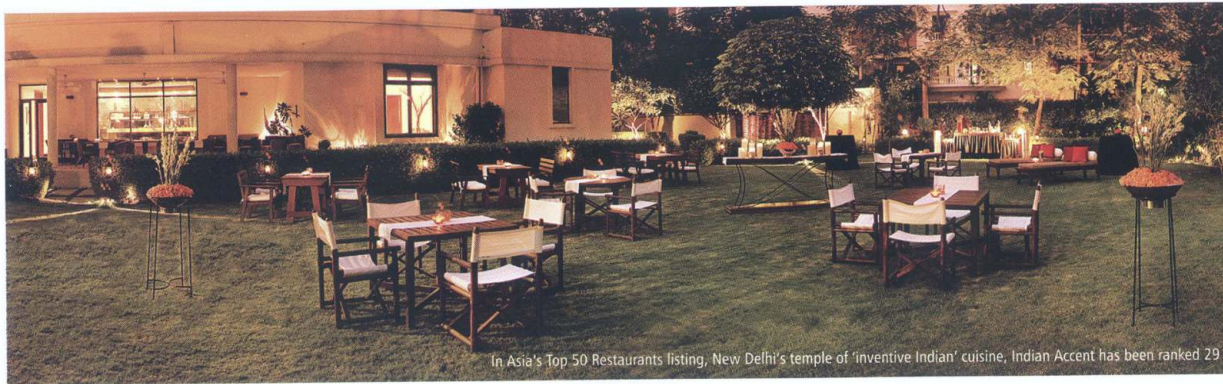
It's different but not gimmicky, because Mehrotra knows he cannot afford to play around with original flavours. He says, "My audience is very difficult — mainly Indian and very well-travelled. They know food very well and are aware of what is real and what is not."

Mehrotra finds it reassuring that this new genre of Indian fine dining is gathering momentum and garnering serious investor interest. "No one tried molecular gastronomy in Indian cuisine

The ALCHEMIST

In five years, Indian Accent's inventive cuisine has won global accolades and has turned India's fine dining business upside down

By **Sourish Bhattacharyya**



In Asia's Top 50 Restaurants listing, New Delhi's temple of 'inventive Indian' cuisine, Indian Accent has been ranked 29

guests, ferried in by 55 private jets, his signature *phulka* tacos with vegetarian fillings, six designer *chaats*, including *dahi batata puri* with wasabi peas, and caramelised onion *kachoris* with a blue cheese sauce.

It may seem incredible today, but Indian Accent almost never happened.

The Manor, a small luxury hotel tucked away in a *cul de sac*, shaded by laburnum trees at the tony Friends Colony, was struggling to make its restaurant, then named 77 after the house number, match its credentials as a preferred address of upper-crust travellers. Its first chef in the late 1990s was Abhijit Saha, fresh out of The

Habitat Centre in New Delhi, before moving on to Tamarai. Mehrotra now says that London exposed him to the many possibilities offered by Indian cuisine, but back in 2008, Khattar, a man with a keen eye for talent, was the only person who believed in him. Mehrotra flew back to Delhi for seemingly endless cooking-and-tasting sessions with Khattar and his team. Even as these sessions were on, the 26/11 terror strikes in Mumbai plunged the hospitality sector into uncertainty. It coincided with the economic slowdown in the western world. Hospitality industry analysts were convinced that the good times were over. India's GDP growth rate, however, beat all expectations,

before Gaggan (Anand, the acclaimed chef-entrepreneur behind the stupendous success of his eponymous 'progressive Indian' restaurant in Bangkok)," Mehrotra says. "I get at least two e-mails and another two or three personal visits by potential investors every week. Recently, an investor from Teheran call me up to discuss the possibility of taking Indian Accent to the Iranian capital." Call it 'modernist', 'progressive' or 'inventive', new Indian cuisine may have a handful of practitioners now, but it is here to stay — and chart out a brave new world beyond chicken *tikka* masala. Mehrotra, in a candid interview, speaks about the state of the industry and more.



It was a leap of faith for Manish Mehrotra to leave London and explore the many possibilities of Indian food in Delhi

Chef, do you believe that fine dining has finally arrived in India, in cities such as Delhi and Mumbai? For decades, we have equated fine dining with expensive white tablecloths, fancy decor and silver service in five-star hotels. That's not fine dining. Restaurants need to deliver a complete culinary experience. Quality defines a fine dining restaurant and not its address. Every dish it serves must be a piece of fine art — pleasing to the eye as much as to the palate.

By the standards you have set, Indian Accent certainly qualifies as a fine dining restaurant. But are there takers for the kind of 'inventive Indian' food you serve?

Indian fine-dining has arrived. We have shown that there's space for fine-dining outside five-star hotels.

Indian Accent seats 56 guests, if we include the verandah. We serve an average of 75-80 guests at dinner-time every day. In the first couple of years, we did abysmal business during lunch hours, but now we get around 15-20 guests during the week and nearly 40-45 diners on Sundays. The average food spend ranges from approximately ₹3,200 to ₹3,500. With drinks it swells up by another ₹1,500.

Is it expensive to run a restaurant such as Indian Accent? Are the operating costs high?

Our food cost is approximately 29 per cent, which means Indian Accent is not a very expensive restaurant to run. But we do have items on the menu that set us back financially. When we serve soft shell crabs, our food cost goes up to 90 per cent. Our popular blue cheese naan, which we offer gratis, costs us ₹8-9 apiece. These items have to be balanced with those that aren't a financial burden, using intelligent menu planning.

What is the biggest challenge you're faced with when running a restaurant with an ambitious menu?

Supplies. We are at the mercy of our suppliers and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's labelling requirements, which holds up imported supplies at ports and lead to shortages downstream. Recently, our supplies of foie gras, which is an essential ingredient in the *gilawat kabab* and the Danish Blue (Danablu) cheese, which goes into the *naan*, stopped because of the new food safety and standards regime.

We had no choice but to go slow on foie gras and buy Danish Blue from department stores at three times the price we pay to our supplier.

Then, suddenly, after an absence of nearly 20-25 days, our supplier dumped ten kilos of foie gras worth ₹72,000. We had no option but to take the delivery, though the peak summer season is a lean period for the restaurant. Gaggan in Bangkok would never have to deal with such problems.

Are erratic supplies the only disadvantage Indian Accent faces when compared to restaurants run by celebrity chefs around the world?

Chefs abroad are spoilt for choice. For instance, they would have access to 22 different types of watercress and micro leaves. We, on the other hand, have to grow our own watercress so that we are not at the mercy of our suppliers. But that's just one of the roadblocks.

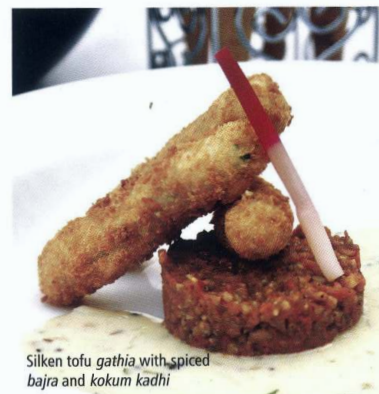
Delhi is not a tourist hotspot and most international travellers use it as a transit point *en route* to Agra and Rajasthan. Also, Indian Accent's international fan following is not as vast as that of an Alinea (Chicago), or an El Celler De Can Roca (Girona, Spain), or a Noma (Copenhagen). These restaurants won't be hurt financially even if they do not attract repeat clientele. I don't enjoy that luxury in Delhi.

Everyone I meet says they're in love with Indian food, but none of them seem to know that

"Everyone I meet says they're in love with Indian food, but none of them seem to know that there exists an inventive Indian cuisine, which goes beyond *naan* bread and butter chicken."



Indian Accent's inventive Indian cuisine attracts repeat clientele who come to explore its contemporary offerings



Silken tofu *gathia* with spiced *bajra* and *kokum kadhi*



Roast scallops *balchao* with *saboodana poppadum* and *kokum powder*



Gujarati *suterfeni*, winter *chikki* served with homemade pistachio ice cream



Mehrotra believes that the future of food will be defined by presentation



Foie gras stuffed *galawat*, strawberry green chilli chutney



Wholemeal and semolina *puchkas*, masala cous cous and five waters



Mishti doi cannoli and amaranth ladoo

there exists an inventive Indian cuisine, which goes beyond 'naan bread' and butter chicken. I was at the prestigious culinary school, ALMA in Parma, Italy, some time back. It was distressing to find out that none of the students knew anything about inventive Indian cuisine. To make restaurants such as Indian Accent thrive, we must make the world aware of what we have to offer. Fortunately for us, our international clientele now comprise nearly 25-30 per cent of our total guests during the summers and about 40-45 per cent during the winters.

The market, despite these challenges, seems to be working in your favour. What are your growth plans moving ahead?

Going international is the way forward for us. We have established ourselves. We have a reputation and a repertoire of recipes. But, at this point, we can't disclose what's on the drawing board.

Restaurants such as Indian Accent drive a culture of celebrity chefs. Do you support the idea of chefs becoming cult figures with a fan following?

It has done a world of good for chefs. We are viewed very differently and celebrity chefs have inspired talented young people to become a part of the profession. Parents no longer want to hold back a child who wishes to become a chef. It has also meant that professionals today are much better paid than their predecessors.

I wish the media gives the same importance to the front of the house staff. If they start lionising our service staff, we'll have much better

people wanting to join the industry as waiters and captains.

What is your take on the quality of hospitality education in the country? Are hotel management institutes producing the kind of talent that the industry needs to advance?

Unfortunately culinary education in our country is in a sorry state. The students studying in hotel management institutes are still being taught old-fashioned techniques, which they have to unlearn the moment they step out of colleges. The institutes can invite chefs who have made a mark in the real world as guest speakers, exposing students to cutting-edge knowledge, but no one has ever approached me or any of my contemporaries.

Some time back I was judging a culinary competition at IHM, Pusa, in New Delhi. I was shocked to see gas burners being used in the institute's kitchen. A fellow judge, an alumnus of the institute, informed me that even his batch had worked on the same range some 20 years ago!

What are your views on fusion cuisine, molecular gastronomy, organic food and healthy eating. Which trend will define restaurant dining in the years to come?

I cannot understand why people consider fusion cuisine to be a contemporary trend. It is as old as Chicken Manchurian! Molecular gastronomy enhances the 'wow' factor of the dining experience by surprising the guest. But it is unlikely to become popular in India because we like our food hot. More importantly, many of the ingredients that

are needed to make spheres and foams are hard to source in India.

People are becoming more conscious about healthy eating. As regards to organic food, I believe that people talk about it more than they consume it in their daily lives. We are at a stage when we only have easy access to organic vegetarian produce. When are we going to move on to mass production of organic meats, organic milk and organic eggs?

In my view, the future of food will be defined by presentation. Food must look good and take you by surprise, without compromising the authenticity of taste. It should evoke nostalgia and bring a smile to your face.

You now have a dedicated fan following. What is the secret behind building and retaining customer loyalty?

Indian Accent gives each guest a complete experience that goes beyond good food. Consistency of food and service quality are other big assets. Our constant effort to keep improving our offerings works in our favour. It helps us stay ahead of the competition.

Can awards inspire more restaurants to achieve the standards of Indian Accent?

Today everyone is giving away awards. What we need is an independent and transparent rating system powered by credible assessors on the lines of the Michelin star rating. For India, we will need an army of auditors, but we can make a beginning with Delhi or Mumbai. •