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Served with an Indian Accent

**Chef Manish
Mehrotra's modern
desi cuisine comes
to America**

PHOTO: GANDHI



He serves Blue Cheese Naan and Duck Chettinad with Foie Gras and Idli, but insists on truly desi ingredients like Tata Salt and Amul Butter. That's Manish Mehrotra for you. And the chef behind Delhi's most expensive restaurant has just brought his unique take on Indian cuisine to America. **Aseem Chhabra/India Abroad** finds out more.

'INDIAN ACCENT IS NOW A TRAINING GROUND FOR MODERN INDIAN FOOD'



PARESH GANDHI

Indian food has been popular among New Yorkers. But in the past 10 years or so, Indian food has been getting a lot more respect — including first Michelin stars in all of North America awarded to restaurants such as Devi, Tulsi and Junoon.

And now, a new restaurant is taking Indian food to a different level. The owners of Indian Accent, perhaps the most expensive Indian restaurant in Delhi, have opened a branch at the Le Parker Meridien Hotel in Manhattan.

The restaurant is helmed in Delhi and New York by Manish Mehrotra, a multiple award-winning chef who calls his cooking "modern Indian cuisine."

A graduate of Mumbai's Indian Institute of Hotel Management who received his early training with the Taj Group of Hotels in India and then was hired by the Old World Hospitality group that now owns Indian Accent, Mehrotra has been in New York City for a few months to watch over the launch of Indian Accent. He welcomes *India Abroad* into his restaurant.

We have been looking forward to the opening of Indian Accent in New York, but I think there was delay from the time the restaurant was announced last year.

There was a bit of construction delay. And there was some delay in getting the chefs from India. I don't have a single local chef.

How many do you have in the kitchen?

Seven.

Are they new hires?

No, they are all from the Indian Accent kitchen in Delhi.

Indian Accent is now a training ground for modern Indian food. I have lost so many chefs... Restaurants like Masala Library and Farzi Café in Delhi were both started by my former chefs.

What was the idea behind bringing the Indian Accent cuisine all the way to New York?

New York is a foodie city, but Indian food is not that well represented here. In India we have so many regional cuisines. But you look at the restaurant menus here you will find Saag Paneer, Chicken Tikka Masala, Pindi Chola only. Some variations of South Indian food are coming up. But they

serve Vindaloo in some restaurants. You don't find Vindaloo in restaurants in India.

There are of course restaurants that Suvir Saran, Vikas Khanna and Hemant Mathur have started — Devi, Tulsi and Junoon.

Hemant, Vikas, Suvir, Floyd (*Cardoz*) — they did everything. Tulsi has a fantastic menu, but they still have Saag Paneer and Pindi Chola. They also have Bhindi Do Pyaza.

Do you have problems with these dishes? There are a lot of New Yorkers who actually like Saag Paneer.

That's absolutely fine. These are good Indian dishes, but there is more to Indian food than those dishes. People should know what our home cooked food is or what Khichdi is.

How do you get that across that to Americans and New Yorkers? I don't know if you ever dared to go down to the East 6th Street restaurants. There are Bangladeshi restaurants that claim to make Indian food, and there are generations of New Yorkers who only go to eat there.

I've faced that in London; there is an even bigger Bangladeshi community in London.

For me, the New York audience is everyone. It's not that I am targeting Indians. What I am doing is Indian food, authentic flavors, not toning down for American palate.

I am also not judging the American palate. But I am not changing anything.

My food is about different combinations, different ingredients and presentation. So, I have dishes from my house and the street.

I read you are from Patna.

Yes. I have dishes from a small community; I have a wedding dish and (*dishes*) from different part of India.

What wedding dish do you have?

Something like a Malai Kofta.

Do you have a Bihari dish here?

Not at present, but Indian Accent in Delhi serves Sattu Paratha with olives and jalapenos.

I have dishes from Bengal and Gujarat. I have a dish called Daal Muradabadi, which is boiled moong daal with different toppings. Otherwise who serves boiled moong daal in a restaurant? You only make it at home when someone is sick.

I had one of the best meals in Delhi at Indian Accent. But it

is also probably the most expensive Indian restaurant in Delhi. How do you expect people to reconcile to that? How much do you charge for Daal Muradabadi in Delhi?

In Delhi I charge about 650 rupees (\$10) with taxes.

But if it is something that is served at home, how do people perceive it has a value of Rs 650?

It is expensive but there is also more than just presenting home food.

I am serving home-cooked Khichdi with a German sausage fried in mustard oil. And it is Gobindo Bhog Khichdi. It is a special kind of small grain Bengali rice, which is used for Khichdi and Payasam. We also serve with it Aloo Chokha Fritters and *achaar* (*pickles*). So, definitely I am not serving just Khichdi.

Even Daal Muradabadi is served with a Chur Chur Paratha, a nice, flakey *ajwainwala* (*carom*) Paratha.

When you serve Khichdi and German sausage I am reminded of the term fusion. Do you like that term?

There is nothing wrong with fusion dishes.

The first fusion dish was done in India 35 years back. Manchurian — there is nothing Chinese about it. It was a fusion dish, but they use only Chinese ingredients — soy sauce, ajinomoto.

Tarla Dalal was the first fusion queen in India. She came up with recipes of Aloo Tikki Burger and Paneer Pizza in magazines like *Sarita* and *Grihshobha*.

In fact, the best fusions are done by housewives in their kitchens. "*Aaj humne is cheez key balls banaye hain, is cheez ke toast banaye hain* (*referring to homemakers who experiment with making savories and sandwiches with different fillings*)"

Whatever fusion and combination I do, there has to be a reason behind it. I am not mixing totally alien things and combining them together. I have a Blue Cheese Naan on the menu, because bread and blue cheese is a classic combination all over the world.

You serve that in India?

It is one of our signature dishes in India. But usually blue cheese is not served with hot bread.



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I guess it melts...

Right. And you will find it in salads. We tried different types of blue cheese in India.

How do you get blue cheese in India?

(Smiles) Come on! You get everything in India now. This is Danish blue cheese.

There is a premium price on the cheese.

Absolutely.

I serve pickled pork ribs in India. That is fusion food. We serve it with sauce made out of Gujarati Chhunda Achaar, which is a *meetha achaar* (sweet pickle made from mangoes). We toss the pork ribs in that sauce. That's one of our biggest hit dishes in India. People are loving that here also.

What does the name Indian Accent indicate?

When we planned the name Indian Accent, the dilemma was whether we were going to serve western food with an Indian accent, or Indian food with a western accent. But it goes dish by dish.

I take an international dish and turn it into an Indian version. I have a Ghee Roast Mutton with Romali Roti Pancakes. It's a complete Indian thing, but the concept comes from the way you eat Peking Duck with pancake, salad, different sauces and you make your own rolls. Again that is one of our signature dishes in India and here also.

You mentioned earlier about the issues you faced in London. What restaurant did you open in London?

It was Chor Bizzare.

And how did you reach people and say I am bringing you something very unique?

Chor Bizzare is still very traditional.

Kashmiri food like the one in Delhi serves?

Yes. But when we started Indian Accent in Delhi at least two tables would walk out everyday. 'You don't have Butter Chicken or Biryani on the menu,' they would say. 'What kind of Indian restaurant is this?'

They would go all the way to New Friends Colony and walk out? When it takes one month to get a reservation?

No, that was when we opened in 2009. Slowly people started understanding and through word of mouth (*our reputation grew*).

And you didn't want to make any compromises at that stage?

Never. We don't serve Butter Chicken. But we have Butter Chicken Stuffed Kulcha on the menu. I reduce your job. You don't have to dip the Naan in the Butter Chicken.

What are the best things you have brought from India, and what are the new dishes you have added in New York?

In the first menu we wanted to have most of our signature dishes from India. But we also wanted to do something for New York City. I have beef on my menu. I was craving for it. So, we have Beef Patthar Ke Kabab with Nihari. They are thin slices of beef cooked in Nihari.

I have foie gras. We once served foie gras in India with Galouti Kababs.

There is Soya Keema, which is my home dish. I add to it quail egg.

Is this a Patna dish?

No, but it was made in my house. This was a complete vegetarian dish, but I have added quail egg to it. We serve it with Lime Leaf Pao. It's basically a version of a very classic Bombay street food — Keema Ghotala. They fry the keema (*groundmeat*) on a *tava* and break an egg on it and mix it together.

There is Duck Chettinad with Foie Gras and Idli.

Let me understand one thing. Most people in India do not eat duck right?

It is not very common. I cook it Chettinad style and serve it with a plate of Idli.

If you go to South India, they also make small Idli in flat plates. I cut the Idli, make it a sandwich with Duck Chettinad and add foie gras on the top. And we add onion chutney and Appalam rice *papads*.

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Indian Accent in Manhattan.

FARESH GANDHI

In your menus you list two types of appetizers — 'first' and 'second.' How do you differentiate?

'First' are smaller portions. In the 'second' section we have our own version of Palak Patta Chaat, which we make with shisho leaves. Those are Japanese leaves. They slightly pungent and have a flavor. Palak has no taste, especially when you fry it.

I have only recently started eating Palak Patta Chaat in Delhi. Where does it come from?

It is from Benares.

One 'second' dish we have is baby squid. We toss it in gunpowder (*a spicy dry dal chutney*). We also have Kolhapuri Chicken Salad. Once we cook the chicken, we let it cool down, chop it and mix it with peanuts and tomatoes.

A few years ago I wrote a restaurant story in Bombay and discovered that even the fanciest restaurants include at least 50 percent vegetarian dishes in their menu.

That was not required in New York at all, but we did it. Out

of 20 dishes, 11 are vegetarian.

If it was not required, did you include these dishes because you believe vegetarian dishes are an essential part of Indian food?

Absolutely. No other national cuisine has more vegetarian repertoire than Indian food. This is one of our strong points I would say.

And a lot of New Yorkers are vegetarian. We even have a vegetarian tasting menu.

I see the prices. I understand how you present and the quality of the food...

It is higher than a regular Indian restaurant.

Well \$55 for a two-course meal before taxes and tip is expensive.

I want to change the perception that Indian food is cheap. There is a lot of hard work. We are not just serving Kadhi from a *handi* (*a deep, wide-mouthed cooking vessel*).

Actually come to think of it Junoon is a fairly expensive restaurant.

Junoon's tasting menu is for \$95. Ours is for \$110. While Junoon has five courses, we have more.

Do you have a tasting menu in Delhi?

It is our highest seller. Rs 3,200 for non-vegetarian; Rs 3,000 for vegetarian food.

But Rs 3,000 is not as big at \$110.

But you are also paying salaries in dollars.

There is no restaurant in India with a Michelin star?

There is no Michelin in India. In Asia they are there only in Japan and Hong Kong.

First I think they will come to Singapore and then perhaps to India.

But the food you serve, I would say it has a Michelin quality.

We started in 2009 and many purists said this is a momentary thing. It will go away.

And then Masala Library and Farzi Café opened.

Yes, as I said they are my boys.

So, you are not planning to stay here for your Michelin star?

If my guests are happy, the Michelin star will come. All of us — Hemant, Vikas or I — have our own style. But I think all of us have this common goal, which is to get more respect for Indian *khaana* (*food*). A New Yorker should not think 'I will not pay \$200 for Indian food.'

So, right now our chef tasting menu — plus the wine pairing — can cost over \$200. Indian food deserves that kind of respect. We have such a great tradition. *Hamare khaane mein kya kami hai* (*There's nothing lacking in our food*)?

Bilkul nahin hai ji (I agree, absolutely nothing lacking).

Plus it is how we present. There is a thinking that a curry dish has to be swimming in oil.

But don't you have oil in your Nihari dish?

It is made with a lot of oil, but you won't see it.

And our ingredients are the best. We only use Tata salt from India in my food. The salt you get in New York was not working for my *khaana*. People think salt is salt, but we realized different salts have different tastes. You can get the fanciest French and Swiss butters in New York, but I needed Amul butter in my food. I found a supplier. And I pay more for Amul butter.

I am sorry, but what is so special about Amul butter?

It's the type of the savoriness and flavor that Amul butter gives. At least I don't get that taste from other butters.

My Indian suppliers tell me that the Indian ingredients I buy, no other Indian restaurant asks for it. If I want tomato pickle from Priya (*Foods*) company, then that is what I would like to get.

I notice that your interior decoration is very sparse.

Yes, we did not want paintings and posters from Kerala or Incredible India or women dancing in the fields. We want people to focus on their food.

Do you play sitar music?

No, not all.

What kind of music you play?

It is contemporary Indian fusion music. It's very low. Usually people sense there is something going on but they do not know what the pieces are. ■



Pathar Beef Kebab with Garlic Chlips and Bone Marrow Nihari.

CHRISTOPHER VILLANO

Soy Keema with Quail Egg and Lime Leaf Butter Pao.

CHRISTOPHER VILLANO