

APOORVA SALKADE



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BY STUTI AGARWAL

It's not often that when you order a plate of tandoori murgh what you get is a beautifully crafted roasted golden-orange bird, served on a rustic wooden board with a side of makhani sauce, onion petals, pickled carrot and chutney. Or imagine breaking into a crisp samosa where instead of the staple potato mash, you taste the creamiest chocolate with a berry punch. Rarer still is when your dish comes with a side of earphones and blindfolds. So while you hear this enchanting track

that reminds you of things jungly, the aroma of fresh leaves and moist wood wafts in the air when a lid is lifted off of a dish. Ain't it a prodigious feast? Well, this is all cooking in our kitchens now, where seasoned chefs are "bringing the curry right back home". They have tasted international success with desi food but their real test might lie here, to serve up Indian to the fussy Indians.

It started with the suave Michelin Star chef Vineet Bhatia, of Master Chef celebritas. He was the first to kick off the trend of Indian sous chefs settled overseas coming back to start their home ventures.

Ziya was launched at The Oberoi in 2010. Soon after, Floyd Cardoz launched Bombay Canteen in 2014. "India is opening up to food in a huge way, and it is just the beginning," says Bhatia. The trend is now gaining momentum with Michelin Star chef Atul Kochhar starting two restaurants in 2016: Not Really Indian, which dishes out "migratory Indian cuisine," and Lima, which combines American, Mexican and Brazilian elements with Indian cuisine. "When I started a restaurant, I

didn't want to do popular Indian food. It was then that I decided to tell the story of migrants settled in Burma, Africa, Singapore and Malaysia, who adapted India cuisine," says Kochhar. Gastronomical innovator Stephen Gomes' Chemistry101 opened doors in Bombay last month. "The industry is booming, and there is no better time to introduce it to new and lost cuisines," says Kochhar.

Most of these chefs put their plans in place before moving out of India in the late '90s. Both Bhatia and Kochhar started their career at The Oberoi and later left for the UK. Kochhar then travelled to trace Indian migrations and explored cuisine evolved in these melting-pots. "Coming home is like coming a full circle," says Bhatia. The others too trained in India before looking for opportunities

KASHIF MASOOD



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abroad. Saurabh Anand, the mind behind Masala House, along with his brother, chef Gaurav Anand, began his food career with a catering company in Delhi before starting Bhatti Indian Grill in the UK. They then went to the US and opened the famous Masala House (Awadhi and coastal fusion), along with other restaurants. For Das Sreedharan, owner and chef at Rasa India, which focuses on Amma's

The prodigal restaurateurs are returning—with labours of love recognised by international foodies

Foreign-Returned Curry Chameleons



Restaurants and the favourite menu picks

Ziya, The Oberoi Chocolate Samosa
Chemistry 101 The boy who never grew up
Rasa India Moru Kachiathu, Kerala's
 light, curd-based delectable
Not Really Indian Tandoori Chicken
Masala House Meen Moily—
 Coastal Fish in curry



1. **CHEMISTRY 101** in Bombay where Stephen Gomez whips up a delicacy
2. **RASA** in Bangalore, run by Das Sreedharan, seen making appam
3. **MASALA HOUSE** in Delhi boasts an original, heady cocktail collection
4. **BENARES** the restaurant, not city, where Atul Kochhar is cooking makhani

food with a modern twist, there was no Indian training until he moved to London and witnessed the booming Indian food business. "In the '90s, there were over 9,000 Indian restaurants in the UK, the British having a long developed taste for it," says Das. "But none of these were authentic—often known as 'British-Indian' food," says Kochhar. Keeping that in mind, all the five set up authentic Indian restaurants, something that took a while to take off. "I had people send back my gaajar ka halwa because it was warm," chuckles Bhatia, "and they refused to eat mutton roganjosh off the bone".

OVER the years, a new side of Indian food has developed out of India. "Food that is light and delicate, not over-the-top spicy," says Das. It is this that has brought the chefs back home; along with their long-standing affinity to the country. Bhatia who runs the famous brand Rasoi, and has 12 restaurants worldwide, says, "There was never a doubt about coming home and giving back what I've learnt". For most, it wasn't a lucrative move. "The Indian endeavour was

not a business strategy, it does not pay off financially," says Bhatia. Kochhar of Benares fame agrees. That's the chief reason why chef Gaggan Anand of Gaggan, Bangkok, retraced his steps and decided against starting a restaurant in India. "The Indian audience is yet to understand the quality versus quantity balance. Most people want a lot on their plates; they claim they like Japanese, but will cringe when eating raw fish," complains Gaggan. He prefers to cater to wealthy immigrants and tourists travelling to India, who are open to innovation. Kochhar believes the Indian audience

is still warming up to Indian food of this kind, but the idea behind opening modern-Indian restaurants abroad and back here is to help remove the tag of a 'curry nation'. The others work on well-trained chefs who run the restaurant machinery as smoothly as possible, while the masterchefs come on frequent visits for five to seven days, five to seven times a year.

But whatever the reasons, all the restaurants have seen success soon enough. The clientele is growing to love this special kind of 'alien food' that makes the familiar strange. "The tastes are developing. When did we ever hear of people asking for wine pairings or going for a three- or five- or seven-course meal," says Anand. Perhaps that was the reason for chef Bhatia to come back even after his famous chain Rasoi did not become a hit in Delhi when it started in 2001. "In the same location where chef Manish Mehrotra now runs the buzzing Indian Accent which has a minimum of weeks of waiting," laughs chef Bhatia. It is why Anand and Das are looking to take Masala House and Rasa to new cities in the country, and Kochhar hoping to go to three or more. Das has even set up a culinary school near his village in Kerala. "I am training young chefs, giving passionate orphans the guidance to become world-class chefs so they can one day run the many Rasa kitchens that are still to open doors and dish out Amma's lost recipes," hopes Das.

Or perhaps it is their way of being able to come home more often and spend time with their families. Who knows.

