

Delhi's party scene is changing and how!

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Find out how two British women promise to alter the Delhi party landscape with their bespoke catering service.

At an event a couple of months ago at the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi, a party-goer was surprised that waiting on the guests were young Western men and women.

But it was the Swiss Embassy, the partygoer told himself, maybe they've got the staff over from Switzerland. But when the partygoer found the same set of waiting staff at another party at someone's home in central Delhi, a smaller event with few expat

guests, he decided it was time to make enquiries.

He found that anybody could hire their services from a company called Damson Food.

The outfit is run by two women, Lucy Holliday and Alice Helme. The partygoer found the two in the kitchen, busy loading food on the platters.

In Delhi, there is a new trend afoot: Western waiters at your party. They are elegant and speak impeccable English - a far cry from tired-looking Indian waiters in vertical bow ties and grimy waistcoats.

The show is orchestrated by Holliday and Helme.

At a cocktail party recently for around 120 guests for an attache to the US Embassy, they start their work at the venue on Aurangzeb Road at 2.30 pm.

Around 5.30 pm Helme calls a huddle to educate the six-member waiting staff about each snack they will serve. "Don't just walk up to a guest with an empty expression; it's great to have a conversation about food."

Helme says the more specific a host is about what she wants for her party - an all-vegan menu or one entirely without nuts -- the more the important it is the staff knows exactly what goes into the food. She signs off with a stern-but-friendly warning about drinking on the job, eliciting nods and familiar smiles from her staff.

The staff is an eclectic bunch.

Twenty-one-year-old Anouk Lerais works with an NGO in Delhi and says she found out about Damson through a Facebook group where Helme had put up a request for English-speaking waiters.

Shobhna Iyer, Lerais' roommate, heard about Damson from her and decided that it would be interesting to work for such a set-up.

Living in Delhi for the last seven years and with a Master's degree from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Iyer works as an editor at a publishing company.

Rignam Wangkhang, a 24-year-old Canadian-Tibetan, who also heard about Damson from Lerais, works as an intern with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

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Since Damson caters to both expats and the boisterous Delhiwalla, do they sense a difference in the way the two communities react to them?

Wangkhang astutely observes that since there is an overt class difference between the waiting staff and the guests, the Indian guests are particularly surprised when they can hold a conversation with the waiting staff.

The staff, including Holliday and Helme, find the race question odd and unsettling, though they do subtly hint that Indian guests can be quite rude to the staff, something that adds to their camaraderie in the kitchen, almost like a protective layer. The party-goer mentions how efficient she found the staff and the service at the Swiss Embassy party which had nearly 300 guests.

Radhika Chopra, who has hired Damson for about five dinner parties at her residence, agrees with this.

"They work very well with a home kitchen. From a plated sit-down dinner to a 'flying buffet', every meal that they have catered for has been original and creative."

Gabrielle Seacy, director at Aktiv Ortho who hired Damson for a party of about 100 guests, adds: "Both Holliday and Helme are relaxed, yet they ensure that the food is delicious, fabulously presented and at the right time -- all with a willing smile." But behind the calm exterior is a series of challenges that Holliday and Helme had to overcome.

The biggest one for both of them, apart from the language barrier, was to find reliable suppliers for ingredients and decor.



When asked how they chose and stuck to one supplier, Holliday laughs and says, "It's mostly by trial and error."

The specialised Continental cuisine they prepare, including some French delicacies, require special crockery in line with the aesthetic flavour of each event.

She recalls an incident when one of the crockery suppliers came with two cartons of broken and chipped glasses, just two hours before an event. Damson caters to largely private parties -- Indian weddings are still a while away.

A canape event is usually priced around 1,500 INR per head, though Helme explains that this may be highly flexible based on how the menu is customised.

The price includes all ingredients, crockery, and crisp table linen.

Helme justifies the price saying that they procure the

food ingredients, especially tricky, exotic fruits like fresh figs and meats, directly from farmers.

"We pay special attention to where our ingredients come from, making our costs run high."

Despite a shipshape, elegant and unique catering experience, most hosts might not want to shell out 1,500 INR just for canapes, especially when other caterers offer a lavish buffet at that price.

Source:

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