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The foodie empire strikes back

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THE HINDU

Yeti — The Himalayan Kitchen in Delhi is a melting pot of flavours from the Himalayas. Photo: Sushil Kumar Verma

With more foreigners opening exotic restaurants, there could be an interesting colonisation of the Indian palate

Sampling international cuisine sometime ago meant going to fancy five-star restaurants. Fast forward to today, and international cuisine is available at a plethora of mainstream restaurants, food chains, and bakeries, most of these run by foreigners. In the process of making sure they got the foods they were used to back home, they also discovered a niche business area that no one had thought about or bothered to fill. The result: a range of authentic cuisines at reasonable prices, with patrons ranging from expats to Indians looking to expand their foodie experience. Surprisingly, none of these restaurateurs are trained chefs, but have proven to be smart entrepreneurs with an insatiable appetite for food. Their tagline is simply quality and authenticity.

One of the first to spot the opportunity and set up an organic farm in Gurgaon, called the French Farm, was the legendary Roger Langbour. It all began when he realised quality meats were not available easily. A passionate organic farmer, he now rears chickens, ducks, guinea fowls and pigs. He also supplies organically grown vegetables during winter. The buzzword for him is quality. As he says, “Everything I supply comes from my hand, my land and I know the quality. I only sell what I grow.” He claims that with French Farm, which is 21-years-old, “I have changed the way of eating in India. I was the first to put ducks on the table and grow organic vegetables. Chicken is the best seller, as also ducks and pork.” He will soon set up an outlet in Delhi with his fellow countryman running another fine dining French restaurant called Rara Avis.

It was the craving for good Mexican fast food that led Bert Mueller to co-found California Burrito, based in Bengaluru. So, with two friends, Dharam Khalsa and Gaelan Connell, the trio took the plunge and soon managed to whip up appetites. As Bert says, “Our burritos and rice bowls are quite popular, as is our Pink Nimbu Pani. I think South Indians like the rice bowl because they love biryani!” What has made the food click is also probably the similarity between Mexican food and Indian. The trio plans to take the chain to Chennai and Delhi soon.

The half-Tibetan, half-Nepali Tenzing Sonam and Meghalayan Ardahun Pinky Passah got together with a chef who has worked in Bhutan. The result? A melting pot of flavours called Yeti — The Himalayan Kitchen in Delhi. On offer are Momos, the tasty Thakali Thali from the Thakali community of Nepal, and a wide range of dishes like Batsa Magu, Yomari, Gyuma, Shabaley, Newari Bara, Chattamari, Kothe. This is just a sample of around 70 dishes, mostly from Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan, with a few from the Northeast. Nearly half the ingredients, especially the spices, are procured from Nepal. Sonam reels off the names: “gundruk, momo masala, white til, Sichuan pepper (timur), lapsi, jimbu...” The food is typical home-style meals, prepared fresh. The cuisine took time to go down, but is now quite the rage, especially the momos and Datshi.

What is food without a bubbly drink to accompany it? And the lack of options was the tipping point that spurred the entrepreneur in South African Michelle Bauer, co-founder of Good Juicery. Based in Pune, she joined her New Zealander husband, a landscape architect, on his

project. Her marketing background came to the fore when she realised that though the food was great there was nothing fruit-based to drink with it. Thus was born the Good Juicery range of sparkling fruit juices — tangy apple, a mellow guava drink and a tart passion fruit drink. A fourth drink is set to be launched soon. What sets their range apart is that, “it is natural juice with no preservatives, artificial flavours or colours; just 40 per cent fruit juice, sparkling water and a touch of cane sugar.” Their canned drinks are available in all the major metros.

The thought of opening a catering service can be daunting to a foreigner, but Alice Mirabel Helme took the plunge anyway. A sit-down dinner specialist, her cuisine focusses on European, Italian and Mediterranean. Alice says, “We are known for our wild mushroom and truffle fettuccine — the signature dish of our in-house chef Tara Guinness from London — and Salted Caramel Profiteroles.”

The flavours and aromas of French patisseries come alive at L’Opera, while Kunafa brings to India the finest of Mediterranean sweets made by Syrian and Jordanian chefs, Artusi brings cuisine from the Emilia-Romagna district of Italy, there are caterers from Lebanon...

The cuisine is not all international; there is customisation to suit the Indian palate, eggless desserts and cakes are common, as are vegetarian variations. Bert adds, “We recently ran a ‘Burritos of India’ promotion where we offered Indian flavours like Chettinad and Rogan Josh in the food. We may introduce more Indian flavours in the future.”

What straddles the growth story of all these expat entrepreneurs is the love for good food. With the doors now wide open, we can look forward to an interesting colonisation of Indian palates.
