

# Desi at HEART

**SOMETHING** about Yulia made me look at her again as I walked into Indian Accent at The Manor hotel last week. Was it that strangely appropriate Indian twang in her English that rang a bell considering she's the manager of the hotel's just-opened fine dining restaurant? Was it the interesting contrast between her striking ash blonde hair and the sedate, *sherwani*-style long coat? Then I saw her full name in the menu — Yulia Kisel Banerjee.

Aha! Suddenly the Indian accent made sense as I remembered where I'd seen her — participating wholeheartedly at our annual colourful Durga Puja celebrations as she's married to a Bengali! What better person to epitomise the culinary-cultural bridge that Rohit Khattar's Old World Hospitality has conceptualised with Indian Accent? She, in a way, is the key to executive chef Manish Malhotra's pan-Indian cuisine: Indian but international and vice versa.

That key in mind, I delved into the degustation (tasting) menu to see exactly how Chef Manish planned to tempt the well-travelled taste-buds of not only the predominantly international clientele that is The Manor's mainstay but also the cosmopolitan Indian. He's, of course, uniquely placed to attempt that, as his stint in London has not only given him an idea of how far he can go with the foreign palate, but also how much innovation the Indian palate can take before crying, "Bus!"

I couldn't help but remember that around seven years ago, in this very hotel, the talented Vineet Bhatia tried to replicate the success of his London restaurant Zaika here with Mushq. It flopped. Indians when in India (even some of those who loved his food in London) simply couldn't handle his western take on Indian cuisine. But, to take the Yulia metaphor, chef Manish has a more clever approach: Indianise foreign ingredients — the opposite of Bhatia's line — and incorporate them into a modern *desi* ensemble.

So the semolina (*sooji*) *phuchkas* or *paanipuris* are authentic but stuffed with 'masala' couscous! And they're accompanied by four eastern "waters" besides the traditional jal jeera — pomegranate, tamarind, pineapple and yoghurt — with Belvedere shots as a sixth option for a spirited western kick. Similarly, his panko-crusting 'bharwan mirch' with goat's cheese mousse and *aam papad* relish has melded a Japanese coating and French filling seamlessly into an essentially Indian spicy starter. And his take on a salmon maki

is to invert the roll using a south Indian curd rice (*thayar saadam*) filling wrapped with the smoked fish!

The more I progressed through the menu — a steal at Rs 1900, with Rs 1,000 extra to include wine — the Yulia metaphor became more pronounced as choice foreign ingredients appeared in agreeable *desi* garb. A single scallop came in its distinct shell with a dab of balchao and a sprinkling of kokum, while the galangal aroma in Chef Manish's deconstructed version of the Parsi *patrani macchi* smartly fused east-and-east.

As for his foie gras-stuffed melt-in-the-mouth galawati kebab with strawberry green chilli chutney, it was a satiating mix of excess-and-excess! Talking of extravagance, besides topping his *maska naan* with foie gras, Chef Manish has also made brilliant use of truffle-scented oil by putting a few drops on mushroom-stuffed *kulchas*, an embellishment I intend to try on the humble Bengali maida paratha at home very soon!

If anything, his mix 'n match of the flavours of India's wide geographical extremities, was even more interesting. While it could not equal the nautical miles encapsulated in the rice crusted red snapper moily paired with greens and pinenut poriyal, or the rosemary rubbed New Zealand lamb chops with wasabi *raita*, my personal favourite of the entire meal was a witty, veggie north-south marriage featuring a paper-thin, crispy dosai cone accompanied by masala morels and water chestnuts (*singhara*).

When it came to sweet somethings, however, Chef Manish obviously decided on the opposite tack: using time-tested and popular *desi* ingredients to make western-style desserts. How else can I describe toffee chyanprash cheesecake with flecks of gold leaf and badam milk (tasted better than I expected!), Old Monk rum-balls with Valrhona chocolate sauce (a great modern mix of nostalgic Indian and western ingredients) and the comforting familiar yet new combination of Kinnaur apple and shakarpara crumble with vanillabean icecream.

Indianising western ingredients has been a well-documented if often ham-handed success, from masala maggi and keema pizza to rajma burgers and more. I do hope Delhi is now mature enough to appreciate that Indian Accent's delightful fare proves the value of keeping it subtle yet distinct. Like Yulia.

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Indian Accent at The Manor, New Delhi, localises foreign ingredients and incorporates them into an Indian ensemble

