



Modern spice

Indian chefs around the world are using new cooking styles and throwing in local ingredients to reinvent their rich cuisine. James Brennan discovers the fresh take on Indian food



Something is happening to Indian restaurants around the world, which is hauling them into the 21st century. It started back in 2001, when Atul Kochhar and Vineet Bhatia became the first Indian-born chefs to win Michelin stars. Their respective restaurants, Tamarind and Zaika, heralded a new era for Indian cuisine in London. Out went the chicken tikka masalas and onion bhajis, in came tandoori pigeon breasts and spice-crusted scallops, and the new Indian cuisine was born.

"The early 90s saw a stream of talented and well-trained chefs from India migrating to the UK. That really helped to elevate the standard of food there," says Kochhar. "Once the local and seasonal ingredients were brought into Indian menus, quality suddenly improved. And the use of good modern techniques and education helped Indian cuisine to reach Michelin stardom."

Kochhar's latest London venture is Benares, a sleek, understated venue that seems a lifetime apart from the gilded Indian restaurants of yore. The food here is unashamedly modern, employing all the techniques and presentation common in European gastronomy. "My chefs are trained in classical Indian and French," says Kochhar. "We are trying to unify the cuisine techniques of the world in Benares' kitchen."

According to Indian restaurateur Sanjeev Kapoor, a member of Singapore Airlines' International Culinary Panel, Indian food has long been at the cutting edge of world cuisine. "If you look back in history and study the food that our ancestors ate, you will notice how much attention was paid to the planning and cooking of a meal," says Kapoor. "Great thought was given to the texture and taste of each dish. So Indian food already had all that's found to be necessary in modern times."

These days, the appreciation of Indian cuisine's distinct texture and taste is reaching new heights. In the *Michelin Guide Great Britain & Ireland 2011*, five Indian establishments in London were bestowed with the restaurant tome's coveted stars. Kapoor, whose *Khana Khazana* TV cooking show draws an audience of millions and has been running in India for 18 years, believes that the Indian food renaissance comes as a result of the cuisine enjoying a higher profile around the world. "Indian food is 'in' and to market it better, the food is being given the modern touch: in presentation, the use of ingredients, modern gadgets and cookware, and also in the naming of dishes so that they are more identifiable."

Migration and mass communication have played their part in familiarising the world with

Facing page: Hari Nayak's masala bass with green chilli rice. Above, from left: Atul Kochhar's pan-fried John Dory; Hari Nayak's spiced scallops

Below, clockwise from left: Aktar Islam's Allepy fish curry; Hari Nayak's aloo chaat; tandoori king prawns; Sanjeev Kapoor's chole canapés; Atul Kochhar's spiced lamb served with bread



Indian food. Hari Nayak is another example of a successful chef who was born in India, but made his name overseas. "There is a need to take Indian cooking to the next level because the world has become smaller due to global travel," says Nayak. "People travel a lot. Their knowledge of world cuisine and their palate is sophisticated and more mature."

Nayak graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1998, and went on to be an apprentice of Alain Ducasse before becoming a chef and restaurateur in New York City. A co-author of the bestselling book *Modern Indian Cooking*, along with Vikas Khanna, Nayak's menus read like a culinary atlas, from the chilli squid with jicama and moong dal salsa, to the chipotle duck tikka with fennel and orange slaw.

"I do combine a lot of ingredients that are popular in the region (North America) to create my Indian dishes," says Nayak. "Many South American, Oriental and Mediterranean ingredients also combine well with Indian flavours."

The global movement of people and ideas may be transforming modern Indian cuisine, but it's small beer compared to the impact foreign cultures have had on traditional Indian food over the centuries. If it wasn't for the Portuguese, for example, there might not be any hot chilli peppers, tomatoes or potatoes in Indian food. And the Persians introduced the thick sauces and crisp flatbreads of Mughal cuisine.

Today, however, it's not just ingredients and recipes that are revolutionising Indian food. Contemporary cooking methods are throwing up all kinds of new possibilities when it comes to preparation while urban lifestyles are placing greater emphasis on health.

Aktar Islam is a British-Indian chef whose Lasan restaurant in Birmingham is leading the new gourmet Indian cuisine. Islam won BBC television's *Great British Menu*, while Lasan was named Britain's best local restaurant on chef Gordon Ramsay's show *F Word*, not only for its modern twist on authentic Indian dishes,

but also for its healthy approach.

"We can cook a batch of rice for a hundred people with under a teaspoon of ghee (clarified butter)," says Islam, who has worked with the National Health Service in the UK to promote healthier eating. "We pre-fluff the rice, strain it and pour all the water away, which takes the ghee off. Then we'll bake it, so you're left with a nice fragrant rice with hardly any of the fat. Our willingness to explore allows us to develop these techniques."

From ingredients to cooking methods, Indian cuisine is being born again. Bloomberg food critic Richard Vines affirms: "Creative Indian chefs are utilising centuries of French gastronomy to bring a new dimension to thousands of years of Asian culinary traditions."

And there's no reason why gourmet Indian should mean bland Indian, according to Nayak. "I tend to use less spices to create a flavourful meal rather than using many spice blends and heavy sauces," he says. "But the flavour is never

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Below, from left: Hari Nayak's mustard shrimp bruschetta; Aktar Islam's salmon confit



compromised. Indian cooking has to be bold, vibrant and flavourful, with a little heat.”

For Islam, contemporary Indian food should never stray too far from its roots. “It’s about respecting the provenance, history and heritage of the dish that you’re presenting. Don’t lose that,” he says. “Indian curries are basically stews, so I will serve it with a good amount of sauce. The experience is still very Indian. It’s not just a little swirl on the corner of the plate, or a bit of foam with Indian flavours.”

Indian food may have gone upmarket without snubbing its traditions, but what does the future hold? “Indian food is forever,” says Kapoor. “In the years to come, I can distinctly see Indian street food taking the world by storm.”

On the long, spice-strewn path of an ancient and evolving cuisine, anything is possible. ■

FIVE OF THE BEST NEW INDIAN RESTAURANTS

Orissa, New York

From fennel infused lamb chops to cardamom brownie, Hari Nayak presents Indian food with a contemporary twist in the Big Apple. www.orissany.com

Azok, Mumbai

Vineet Bhatia won the first Michelin star awarded to an Indian restaurateur at London’s Zaika restaurant; now his brand of European-influenced Indian food is making a splash in his hometown of Mumbai. www.azokrestaurant.com

Benares, London

Atul Kochhar’s Michelin-starred restaurant is all mood lighting, dainty plates and minimalist sophistication, but standouts are its flairful modern flavours, Indian-inspired cocktails and even a sommelier’s table. www.benaresrestaurant.com

Options, Dubai

Sanjeev Kapoor’s Dubai outpost glitters with its sparkly decor, and dazzles with its progressive menu of fuss-free, robustly flavoured cuisine. www.optionsdubai.com

Lasan, Birmingham ▼

With a three-month waiting list, not even footballer Wayne Rooney can get into Aktar Islam’s award-winning restaurant without booking ahead. www.lasangroup.com

