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A chat with the minds behind The Table, Mumbai



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The husband-wife duo of Jay Yousuf and Gauri Devidayal took a big gamble when they chucked their comfortable overseas jobs and decided to start a fine dining restaurant in Mumbai – at a time when almost every other hospitality company was doing so. Years later and despite the competition, The Table has managed to hold its own and built a reputation of serving international cuisine with a Californian twist. Vinita Bhatia talks to owners Gauri Devidayal and Jay Yousuf on what it takes to run a successful restaurant in Mumbai.

Vinita Bhatia (VB): Following successful careers as finance professional and computer engineer, what made both Gauri and you shift tracks to the hospitality industry?

Jay Yousuf (JY): After spending 26 years in the US, I finally returned to India in 2007. Having had the opportunity to live and work abroad, and experience a variety of cuisines and restaurants, my passion for exceptional food made me realize that there was a need for a high

quality and innovative fine dining venue in Mumbai. This inspired me to fulfill my dream of opening my own restaurant and having lived in San Francisco for 14 years, I wanted to bring a taste of the city's distinctive food culture back to Mumbai.

Gauri Devidayal (GD): As he said, The Table was basically Jay's idea. I could see his passion for the project and also the commercial sense behind doing it, in that there were very few good stand alone fine-dining restaurants in Bombay and none serving the kind of cuisine we wanted to have. I wanted to support him as much as possible and as I got more involved with the project, it became apparent that this was going to be a full time job for me, so it was a no brainer that I would have to quit my current job. On the one hand it was a difficult decision given the high risk we were taking, since neither of us had any previous experience in the hospitality industry. At the same time, it was an exciting project to be involved with and I wanted to support Jay all the way. I also knew I would continue using my existing tax and finance knowledge, so I didn't feel like I was leaving my profession entirely!

VB: Did you harbor any doubts that The Table wouldn't be popular? It was quite a gamble you were taking, especially because till a few years ago Mumbaikars were not very adventurous when it came to their eating out habits.

JY: It was definitely a gamble, but given the growing number of well travelled Mumbaikars who didn't have enough good stand alone dining options in the city, it seemed to me that there was enough room for restaurants like The Table.

GD: Once we decided to go ahead with the project it really didn't make sense to ponder too much over the possible failure of the restaurant. We were determined to make it a success and decided to deal with the success or failure as it came.

VB: Just how much experimentation went in before the two of you along with your Executive Chef Alex Sanchez, were clear about the kind of dishes to feature in The Table's menu?

GD: We were very lucky with the level of talent that Joey Altman, our consulting chef, and Alex Sanchez brought to the project. To be honest I can't remember any dish we didn't like during the trials. And we were committed to having what we wanted on the menu and not pandering to the Indian palate.

JY: We wanted to keep our restaurant simple, which is why we also decided to name it after the signature community table in the restaurant. VB: What according to you is global cuisine in the Indian parlance? GD: It's essentially inspired by different cuisines from around the world. Our menu cannot be classified under any one cuisine, but rather it is a menu which takes inspiration from French, Japanese, American, Oriental, Thai, Mediterranean cuisines but is presented with our Californian chef's take on it. It is very different from the concept of 'multi-cuisine' which Indians are so familiar with. VB: Why do you think do an increasingly number of fine-dine restaurants position themselves as specialists in some global cuisine, while giving their native cuisine a miss? GD: Most locals who frequent fine dine restaurants are likely to have cooks at home. So when they dine out, it is usually to have a different cuisine or experience and that is what restaurants are looking to provide.

VB: The Table has always taken pride in using locally sourced produce for its food. Yet, a lot of dishes on its menu have exotic ingredients that are not necessarily available locally. So how do you maintain this fine balance?

GD: Unfortunately Bombay is not yet at the place where we produce a range of high quality, flavourful, local fruits, cheeses or vegetables. It is certainly growing with producers such as Trikaya, but we are not quite there yet, if you compare it to cities like San Francisco. So for an ingredient driven menu, it is difficult to rely entirely on the local produce and we do need to import certain things. But we are looking to do this less and less, not least because of the high cost factor, without compromising on the quality of our dishes.

VB: You have a Culinary Institute of America-trained American chef Alex Sanchez as your executive chef. How can you ensure that he keeps creating dishes that are appealing to the Indian palette?

GD: I think we sometimes underestimate our Indian customers. They are widely traveled and when they are back home, they are actually looking for restaurants to give them the quality of food they have tasted in well established culinary cities around the world. Our customers do not actually want chefs to adjust dishes to the Indian palate. At least these are the kinds of customers we are looking to cater to, so we are confident that Chef Alex can continue to please them with his repertoire.

VB: Giving the escalating prices of dining out, it is now being opined that soon eating out in fine dine restaurants will be more of a luxury than a de rigueur affair. What are your opinions about this?

JY: All I can say is, I really hope not!

Photo courtesy: The Table

