



CRÊPES, SUZETTE
With the ambiance of a Parisian café, Suzette is bringing casual French food to Indian diners. At right, its orange honey crêpe, with hot chocolate.



GOING GLOBAL

MUMBAI'S RESTAURANT SCENE HAS BECOME INTERNATIONAL, WITH AN INFLUX OF FOOD PIONEERS WHO ARE BRINGING THEIR LOVE OF FINE CUISINE TO INDIAN DINERS.

By Aseem Chhabra | Photographs by Sebastian Cortes



Jérémie Sabbagh and Antonia Achache first came to India eight years ago as French exchange students at a university in New Delhi. They met while there and learned Hindi. When they returned to France, they decided that one day they would go back. Now married, Sabbagh got a job as a corporate attorney for a French law firm's Mumbai office while Achache was hired by a large Indian not-for-profit organization, working in the field of children's education.

In Mumbai, the two met another Frenchman: Pierre Labail. They talked about how they loved Mumbai, yet missed Paris—especially the museums and the food—and just like that, started planning to open a restaurant. First the thought was to have a food truck in Mumbai that would serve French food, but the city regulations killed the idea. Instead, in early 2011, they opened a small French crêperie, Suzette, in the South Mumbai—or SoBo (for South Bombay, using Mumbai's older name)—high-rise office building district, Nariman Point.

THE PIONEER SPIRIT

Sabbagh, Achache and Labail are only 30 years old, but they are pioneers in Mumbai's burgeoning restaurant scene. This flourishing group includes foreign nationals who have developed emotional attachments to Mumbai or Indians who have returned to their home country af-

ter having spent many years living outside India.

Among this set of pioneers is Gauri Devidayal, who runs The Table with husband Jay Yousuf, serving nouvelle American cuisine. Devidayal lived in London for eight years, and Yousuf spent 23 years in San Francisco and Miami before moving back to Mumbai.

"We don't have a hospitality background, so it was about how we want a restaurant to be," says Devidayal, "It's pure intuition, based on our eating-out experiences."

The Table was born in January 2011 in SoBo's Colaba area on what is quickly becoming a restaurant and café row. India's first Le Pain Quotidien opened across the street from The Table, and there's a Starbucks a few blocks away, along with Moshe's, a chain that serves Mediterranean food.

For The Table, Devidayal and Yousuf hired New York-based Indian American architect Tarik Currimbhoy to convert an old traditional eatery into a modern restaurant. And they brought in a 26-year-old chef, San Francisco's Alex Sanchez, who created an eclectic menu of small and large plates: food meant to be shared, including boneless chicken "wings," shrimp dumplings in a spicy ginger broth, zucchini spaghetti with almonds and roasted red beets with goat cheese.

While explaining their menu to the potential clientele,

EAST MEETS WEST

Eggs benedict with fresh salad (below left); boneless chicken wings and beet and orange salad (at right) are new to the Indian dining scene. Below right, Jérémie Horowitz (top), Tarini Mohindar and Viraf Patel (left to right), the three owners



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AROLA at the JW Marriott Mumbai

The JW MARRIOTT MUMBAI stands like a palace on Mumbai's Juhu Beach. Its grand lobby in the center of the hotel has steps that head down to Lotus Café and overlook the swimming pool and the beach. It boasts a spa, a coffee shop frequented by Bollywood celebrities, a bar and restaurants with Indian, Asian and Italian cuisines. But the crown jewel is the Spanish tapas eatery Arola.

In January 2012, world-renowned Chef Sergi Arola sent one of his sous-chefs, Manuel Oliveira, from the two-Michelin star restaurant Sergi Arola Gastro in Madrid to Mumbai. Mumbai's Arola would follow similar restaurants in Santiago, Sao Paolo, Paris and Barcelona, but with a touch of Indian flavor.

Soon after his arrival, the 28-year-old Oliveira realized two things: the restaurant's Indian clients often were vegetarian and they also liked to eat main courses, after enjoying a set of hot and cold tapas plates. The Arola at the JW Marriott is the only restaurant in the chain that serves main courses.

And to mirror the gin-and-tonic culture in Spain, Arola has an elegantly designed gin bar—the largest in Mumbai with 32 varieties of gins.

I started my evening at Arola with a tall glass of sangria, followed by a large gin and tonic with a twist of orange rind. Oliveira's specially prepared tapas included Naan Tumaca (naan bread with a tomato, garlic and olive oil dip); Espárragos Blancos (white asparagus); Patatas Bravas (deep fried potatoes with spicy tomato sauce); baby carrots fried in crispy tempura; ham from Iberia; and tandoor-roasted lobster with almond cream. It was surely one of the best meals I had in Mumbai! —A.C.

DINE AND DELIGHT

The baby lamb at Neel's, above, is a must for non-vegetarians. At right, Chef Manuel Oliveira of Arola produces the finest Spanish tapas in town. Below right, Arola at the JW Marriott Mumbai.

who were used to regular Italian, Chinese or Indian cuisine, Sanchez and the co-owners of The Table also realized the importance of including vegetarian dishes on their menu. As India and cities like Mumbai are experiencing a high economic growth, Indians and the expat population are going out to eat in large numbers. But many Indians, especially those coming from Mumbai's traditional business families, tend to be vegetarian, which also means no seafood. Most of Mumbai's restaurants are mindful of that, keeping nearly half of their menu vegetarian.

NO-FUSS FINE DINING

A 10-minute walk from The Table is another nouvelle American restaurant, Ellipsis—a beautifully designed eatery, run for the last year by its 33-year-old Chinese-Canadian chef Kelvin Cheung. (Born in Toronto, Cheung grew up in Chicago.) "I grew up in my dad's restaurants: full-on Chinese, Hong Kong, Cantonese food," Cheung says.

The idea behind Ellipsis is for customers to have a good time in a casual environment. There is a big bar space, with comfortable couches and two levels of seating that offer a fine-dining experience, minus the white tablecloth. It is one of the few places in Mumbai where one can eat fish tacos, pork belly buns, and chicken and waffles with maple syrup. Ellipsis also serves real beef hamburgers and steaks, as opposed to the buffalo meat that is offered by most other restaurants.

Creating vegetarian dishes for the menu was a challenge for Cheung. "As bad as it sounds, back home most kitchens will serve one or two vegetarian dishes," he says. But since he wants to be responsive to Mumbai's large vegetarian population, half of the Ellipsis menu is vegetarian, under the headings of "Garden" (salads) and "Farm" (pastas). People have the choice of adding meats to dishes in those sections.

"The restaurant scene here is so new that there isn't a proper infrastructure for supplies," Cheung notes. "I haven't had bacon in three weeks." During the monsoon season that lasts from early June to late August, fresh seafood is not available in Mumbai. The menu at Ellipsis changes every day, evolving around whatever Cheung finds in the markets.

CATERING TO THE CUSTOMERS

At Suzette, the owners had planned to simply serve crêpes and coffee at their original Nariman Point location, but soon realized that the Indians who visited this spot wanted more. To meet those expectations, the menu now includes salads and pastas, with several vegetarian options. But in the middle of the day at Suzette's second location in Bandra-Pali Hill, a neighborhood packed with Mumbai's hipster population—young Bollywood scriptwriters, struggling actors and artists—people can be seen just enjoying the simple crêpes (*cont'd on page 61*)



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(cont'd from page 58) with chocolate and caramel, along with the homemade hot chocolates.

INTRODUCING CAFÉ CULTURE

At the Belgium-inspired Café Zoe, Jérémie Horowitz, another pioneer on the Mumbai restaurant scene, recounts his association with the city. A diamond trader from Antwerp, Horowitz often traveled to Mumbai and even lived there for a period before he decided to open up a café that would remind him of Belgium.

Thus Café Zoe was created in an old silk mill space. Horowitz runs the operation along with his two Indian partners Tarini Mohindar and Viraf Patel, who is also the chef. The restaurant opened its doors in January 2012. Zoe has a large warehouse look, with a lot of natural light coming from above. Tables and chairs (bought from Mumbai's large flea market, Chor Bazar) are functional but comfortable.

"Café Zoe is a European name, but that concept didn't exist in Mumbai," says Horowitz. "There were high-end or local restaurants and just bars, nothing in between. No place where you go without thinking what you want to eat," Patel adds. "We like hanging around here ourselves. It's an extension of our home." With free Wi-Fi, Zoe encourages people to come and spend time at the restaurant with their computer. "I never have to chase people out because I need a table," Horowitz says.

Zoe opens at 7.30 am for breakfast and closes late at

1.30 am. The menu is like that at a European brasserie. Main courses are served during lunch and dinner. Popular items on the menu include the mini lamb burgers (sliders), to eggs Benedict (breakfast is served all day) and quinoa (imported from South America) salad with arugula. Given that Zoe is a Belgian establishment, they serve perhaps the best French fries in town.

No restaurant experience in Mumbai is complete without a visit to an Indian eatery. One of the best new additions to the Indian food scene in the city is Neel, a large eatery located at the city's Mahalaxmi Race Course, and close to the historic Haji Ali Mosque. Owners Rahul and Malini Akerkar also run the popular Indigo Deli, with a couple of locations in the large sprawling city.

With Neel they wanted to get to the roots of authentic India cooking—partly inspired by cuisines from two Indian cities Hyderabad and Lucknow, both with a strong Muslim culture influence. And so they hired Chef Mukhtar Qureshi, who comes from a family of Muslim chefs.

Qureshi's creations included some authentic kebabs: galouti with fine-minced lamb and karachi, a chicken kebab with beetroot flavor. Among the popular seafood dishes is Neel ki tadke walli pomfret, a broiled fish marinated in yogurt, curry leaf and black mustard seeds. And as with all other Mumbai restaurants, Neel has a large selection of vegetarian dishes—a tradition that is a must for this new wave of eateries to be accepted by Mumbai restaurant goers. □

SIZZLE

At right, the pork belly tacos at Ellipsis. Above, Chef Cheung from Chicago has brought a revolution in taste to South Mumbai. The décor at Ellipsis is about fusion and novelty.