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Can Western chefs curry favour in India?

By Rajini Vaidyanathan
BBC News, Mumbai

Generations of Indians left the country for the West taking with them their culinary influences to start restaurants around the world. Now, as more people are moving back to India, they are changing tastes in the reverse direction too.

"Some of our customers have never eaten truffle pasta or heard of quinoa before," says Jeremie Horowitz, as he sits perched on a bar stool sipping a cappuccino.

His restaurant, Cafe Zoe, a loft-style European eatery with exposed brickwork, high ceilings and retro-chic decor, feels like it could be in New York, London or Paris, but this is a converted mill in Mumbai's old textiles district.

There is no Indian food on the menu, yet the restaurant is fast becoming one of Mumbai's most popular, with expats and locals.

"It's more about the European experience, atmosphere and ambience, on top of the European food. We wanted to create the feel of a neighbourhood style bar where you can eat breakfast, lunch and dinner, something that was missing here in the city," says Mr Horowitz, who moved from Belgium to Mumbai five years ago.

Like so many people, he had always dreamed of opening a restaurant, but chose India because of the huge potential he saw here.

Rising incomes and an increase in the number of Indians travelling abroad have led to more people demanding foreign food when at home, says Mr Horowitz.

"India for us made sense because it's a volume market and if you can get the volumes in India the numbers can go high, very fast," he said.

Changing tastes

"This concept would have worked anywhere but the potential in India to go beyond that one restaurant is huge."

Mr Horowitz is one of a number of entrepreneurs moving from the West to India to tap into the changing tastes of India's growing middle class.

In big urban areas like Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore, new restaurants are opening up every month, many started by foreign

entrepreneurs.

And on offer is everything from French crepe cafes to fine dining, Mexican restaurants to micro-breweries, Spanish tapas to authentic Japanese.

Alex Sanchez, the head chef of fine dining restaurant The Table, moved from San Francisco to Mumbai. Mr Sanchez had been working as a chef in the Bay area when he was asked to relocate to open the restaurant.

"San Francisco is saturated with great restaurants and great chefs. When I was deciding whether or not to move to Mumbai, I recognised that I could have a much larger impact here.

"In San Francisco, I'd be another good chef with another good restaurant. In Mumbai, I'm one of a kind."

Mr Sanchez serves up high-end contemporary food, drawing on a range of international cuisines - everything from gourmet burgers to steaks, to pastas and risottos.

He says he has moved to Mumbai at a time when the number of foreign restaurants have increased and there has been an "explosion" in the interest in food.

An Indian twist

India is no stranger to Western food, but truly authentic dishes have typically been served in five-star hotels, says Rushina Munshaw Ghildayal, a food consultant and culinary trainer based in Mumbai.

"For the last decade or a bit more, we've had international cuisine, but we've had parallel cuisines. So Indian-Chinese rather than just Chinese, or Indian-Italian, and continental food, but the way it's served in India is more the British Raj meets Indian food," she says.

In general, much of the foreign food served in mainstream restaurants in India is given an Indian twist, partly to cater to the Indian palate, and also because the chefs are not always from overseas.

"Whenever any cuisine travels to a new culture, it's a caricature of the cuisine which travels: you can't transport everything," she says.

Restaurateurs such as Mr Sanchez and Mr Horowitz are trying to change this, creating dishes with a distinctly foreign flavour, and by sourcing authentic ingredients.

This can be challenging.

Customs regulations and a lack of infrastructure can make it difficult, time consuming and costly when it comes to ensuring the freshest salad leaves are on the plate, or the best brie is delivered from France.

But this, Mr Sanchez says, is one step towards ensuring dishes aren't simply "Indianised".

"When I see chicken tikka on a pizza or atop a Caesar salad, I can't help but see a lack of creativity. I suppose capitalising on the lowest-hanging fruit is good for business, but I don't adhere to those principles. When I create a dish, I ask myself, 'Do I want to eat this?'," he says.

Striking a balance

Getting customers to try new flavours in a food culture dominated by traditional Indian cuisine does sometimes mean bridging the gap by not deviating too much from the familiar, spicier "in your face" tastes, says Ms Ghildayal.

She points out that even global brands such as Starbucks, which recently opened its first branches in India, have had to adapt for Indian customers, serving up a tikka panini, while McDonald's offers a McAloo Tikki burger.

Ms Ghildayal, who advises restaurants on menus, says it is all about striking a balance: "If 10 people like a capellini, there are 50 more people here who like a spicy Arrabiatta sauce."

Another consideration for foreign restaurateurs opening in India is a huge culture of vegetarianism as well as dietary concerns.

A lot of Indian food can be high in carbohydrates and deep-fried, especially at the lower end of the market.

Trying to bring fresh and healthy food was one of the prime drivers for Aditya Parekh's sandwich-and-salad business, Paninaro, which he opened in Mumbai this year.

Mr Parekh, 31, grew up in Mumbai but left the city to live in the US. He returned to India seven years ago and had a "eureka moment".

Sitting at his desk, working for his family business, he realised that only Indian snack food or curries, or five-star hotel lunches, were on offer for his lunch.

In New York his staple diet was a sandwich and a salad. The idea to bring a similar concept to India grew out of the lack of fresh sandwich chains in Mumbai.

"People are open to try this kind of food but they've never been given the chance to. I think we are giving them something that's healthier specially at lunchtime.

Ms Ghildayal says it will take some time before Indian tastes can truly be turned on their head.

But just like overseas Indian culture has adapted dishes which are not so popular in India such as Vindaloo, entrepreneurs are trying to tempt tastebuds here with interesting flavours which many here have never tried before.

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