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Afsha khan : Sat Feb 11 2012, 02:41 hrs

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By no stretch of the imagination is beetroot among Chef Vineet Bhatia's favourite vegetables. Yet, the twice-Michelin starred chef loves working with it at his restaurants, Rasoi in London and Ziya at The Oberoi in Mumbai. On a recent visit to the city, the 45-year-old charmed guests with a creamy beetroot dip that added a touch of sweetness to the grilled prawns it was served with. It didn't stop there. He also served a light beetroot soup with Indian fish roe. While the vegetable did take centre stage on his menu then — save for the dip — Bhatia is hesitant to add more variations of beetroot dishes in India. "Beetroot is underrated here because people's mindsets are still closed in that regard," he says, adding, "In Europe, people are more open to experimenting. With its vibrant colour and a flavour that blends well with anything from chicken tikka and coconut upma to rabdi and kulfi, it's quite a hit abroad."

Shunned as a messy vegetable, associated with the least favourite sabji cooked at home, the very mention of beetroot still meets with upturned noses. Yet, its place on the menus of gourmet restaurants is on the rise, thanks to growing awareness regarding its health properties. "Thanks to the internet and numerous educational write-ups, people now know that it boosts the body's natural defenses in the liver and regenerates cells in the immune system," says Chef Rupesh Petkar from Pali Village Cafe, which serves a plate of supple tiger prawns on a bed of beetroot risotto. "Now, foodies have developed a taste for it."

Chef Manu Chandra, executive chef at The Olive Bar & Kitchen, believes that beetroot is no longer looked upon as an inferior ingredient that stained everything it touched. "One never applied good cooking techniques to it in the past. But that is fast changing, and I'm delighted to see the number of places that feature it on their menu," he says. He also believes that this trend of shunning vegetables also extends to eggplant, radish, okra, kohlrabi and karela. "People seem to regard them as sub-par vegetables, and happily embrace poor quality 'imported' or 'English' vegetables. This is still a trend but a fading one," he adds.

A number of chefs are taking advantage of beetroot's versatility by using it in both sweet and savory dishes. It stays out of the limelight as a puree in soups and adds colour and flavour to cakes and sorbets. It also plays a key role in pickled salads, carpaccio and risotto. At The Table in Colaba, owner Gauri Devidayal made an extra effort to market the beetroot salad and risotto to her customers. "Right from the tastings to when we opened up, people were averse to eating anything with beets in it," she says, adding, "I encouraged guests to try these dishes and offered to knock them off their bill if they didn't like it. Today, the beetroot salad is in our top three signature dishes."

Like Devidayal, many Mumbai-based chefs are putting a lot of effort into changing mindsets regarding what defines the word gourmet. "For years, people's perception of gourmet has been ingredients that are hard to find or are imported such as fine cheese, cold cuts, flavored oils

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