

# LET'S GET FRESH

The culinary landscape of India is slowly changing as chefs strive for purer, fresher flavours and embrace the 'farm-to-table' concept, says FAREEDA KANGA

AM out shopping for dinner...but instead of a trolley and credit card, I am holding a fishing rod and net! The azure blue seas of the Indian Ocean in the Maldives is my playground for a culinary feast of the freshest seafood ever imaginable.

I salivate over the freshest and firmest catch of the day from tuna, red snapper to Green job fish and juicy prawns.

While the journey from net to table is minimised because of our geographical location in a setting like the Maldives — it's heartening to know that in big cities around the world, including back home in Mumbai, the farm-to-table concept is being embraced whole-heartedly.

### Freshness defined

Simply decoded, this food trend lobbies for fresh ingredients and purer tastes with a disconnect from processed foods and flavours. The movement towards farm-to-table at

its core is the concept of connecting communities to local farmers in an effort to make rich-in-quality ingredients more accessible. This growing trend is seen as an excellent way to support one's local community too.

After my tryst with fresh flavours and tastes in the Maldives, I was curious to see whether our local chefs had also embraced this concept. Happily, many of them indeed had.

As early adopters of the farm-to-table philosophy, the kitchens of Four Seasons Hotel, Mumbai do not go far to source food. "Importing international quality produce is a challenge in Mumbai and we have acquired the use of a farmland, just four hours drive from the city. It gives us an opportunity to be involved in the process of farm-to-table from start to finish," says Executive Chef Oscar Gonzalez.

This fertile land is ploughed regularly for a majority of seasonal vegetables to maximise the produce. This crop rotation concept helps in quality control, provides accessibility to key ingredients but also supports sustainable farming. It ensures that the ingredients are fresh, retain their natural flavours and are healthy to consume. Gonzalez explains, "While these benefits have a direct relation to how great the food can taste at our restaurants, it also makes us conscious about our carbon footprint. Who doesn't want to have a better tomorrow?"

### A historical journey

Perhaps one of the pioneers of the farm-to-table concept was an American culinary legend, Alice Waters whose iconic restaurant Chez Panisse is one of the modern forerunners of this concept. Her story bears a mention in connection to this trend.

Eating out in the '70s in California meant burgers and fries. Then a young Alice Waters returned from a trip to France in 1971 and changed all that.



A mixed bed of carrots and radish farmed by the Grand Hyatt in Goa. PIC COURTESY

ingredients and bold flavours in French cooking she opened Chez Panisse in Berkeley, inadvertently creating a new style of cooking Californian Cuisine.

The emphasis of this cuisine is on the use of fresh, local ingredients, which are often, acquired daily at farmers markets. Menus are changed to accommodate the availability of seasonal ingredients.

There are many clones of this iconic restaurant including the wildly-popular Zuni Café at Market Street known for its divine Caesar

Salad, famed roast chicken gnocchi oozing with the ricotta cheese ever.

Closer home in Mumbai's Colaba district, at ELL Executive Chef Kelvin Cheung, first to bring this into practice in city, with a menu, which changes every day.

"We are truly dedicated to catering our customers on quality ingredients, so leading with a farm-to-table concept seemed like a natural progression," says R. Talwar, CEO of IH Hospitality



Seasonal Grilled Vegetables with Garlic, Chilli Oil and



IMPORTING INTERNATIONAL IS A CHALLENGE IN MUMBAI. CHEF OSCAR GONZALEZ ACQUIRED THE USE OF LOCAL INGREDIENTS AND HOURS OUTSIDE OF THE CITY IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE PART OF 'FARM-TO-TABLE' MOVEMENT.

Oscar Gonzalez





Freshly-picked lettuce is used by five-star hotels for salads



Meen Pollichathum – Fresh Pearl fish, steamed in banana leaves, served at Malabar House



Fresh cardamom produce from Malabar House's kitchen, PIC COURTESY MALABAR HOUSE



THE LONG-TERM GOAL OF THE TABLE FARM IS TO PROVIDE US WITH AS MUCH SEASONAL PRODUCE AS POSSIBLE, OVER ABOUT AN ACRE OF LAND. IN THE FUTURE WE WOULD LIKE TO INVITE RESTAURANT PATRONS TO THE TABLE FARM TO LEARN MORE ABOUT NATURAL FOOD GROWING METHODS AND PARTICIPATE IN THIS FARM-TO-TABLE EXPERIENCE

Alex Sanchez  
Executive Chef, The Table



Organic veggies being grown at the Pinto farm in Goa

Many hotels such as the ITC Grand Central, Parel, take the concept of 'Responsible Luxury' very seriously. Hence the farm-to-table concept fits well into their corporate ethos.

Chefs at this hotel are building relationships with local farmers and producers and changing their purchasing habits, supporting the local food economy and the eco system. "We also produce at certain times homegrown sprouts such as flax, sunflower, pumpkin, mustard and fenugreek etc, grown in soil free tubs. This approach of eco-responsibility is in the interest of reducing carbon foot prints, reducing food miles, increasing sustainability and improving eco consciousness," says a spokesperson for the hotel.

I'm pleasantly surprised to find properties not just in Mumbai but in smaller metros such as Kochi too

beans. Tiger prawns coated in crispy noodles or cuttle fish sticks are savoured as the seafood comes daily from local fishermen.

"Freshness is the soul of the kitchen and the team realises that. From jams and marmalades for breakfast to pickles and preserves for our lunch-time Thali to our homemade ice creams and sorbets, all are prepared in-house from the basic produce. Our creative cooking is based on the availability of fresh products and the emphasis on local produce is very visible in our menu.

We change the menu with the seasons, therefore we use a larger

emphasises the roots of our food habits. This has not only an impact on local small businesses but helps also to build up of a responsible health consciousness," says chef Nair.

My final stop on this culinary adventure is at the Grand Hyatt Goa, which receives organically grown fresh farm produce for all the dishes made at their seven foods and beverage outlets from a small store in Talegaon called Green Essentials. The hotel's Executive Chef has travelled across the state of Goa to search for organically grown, fresh farm produce.

fertile, segregated kitchen waste for composting is supplied by the hotel. The collaborative effort not only supports the local community but also aids in reusing waste as well as reduction of the our carbon footprints.

Traditionally as Indians we have always insisted on home cooked fresh meals. To keep up with the fast moving world, we recently slipped into adapting pre-cooked industrial food. Unfortunately many restaurants utilise this as cost effective sales tool. However it's lovely to see (and taste) the revival of that which is pure, fresh and free of chemicals finding its way to our