

Hemant Oberoi Opening the Pandora's Box

Text & Photographs: **Farzana Contractor**

You can't keep a good man down, not for long. And if the man happens to be a chef, you can't keep him out of a kitchen for long. Hemant Oberoi is right where he belongs, this time in his very own state-of-the-art kitchen, his very agreeable fine dining restaurant situated at Bombay's new corporate headquarters, BKC. This along with *Yantra*, his restaurant in Singapore, is what keeps him busy as ever

Hemant Oberoi, for all the success that has come his way, could very well have knocked off his apron, when he retired from Taj Mahal Hotels last year and simply rested on his laurels. Especially when you consider that both his sons, Siddharth and Saransh are in the hospitality business (one is based in London at St. James Court and the other runs a successful restaurant *Masala Street* in San Diego, USA), and he could have merely been their consultant and taken life a bit

The master chef at his very own luxurious and grand restaurant, *Hemant Oberoi*

Cauliflower Crème Brûlée



Chilean Sea Bass



The process involved in arriving at Melon Gazpacho



easy. But no, you cannot keep a chef away from going on and on. And to be honest, I for one am mighty glad he launched *Hemant Oberoi*, his eponymous flagship restaurant, for I like the kind of food he creates.

As do, I guess, hundreds of others. We are talking about a chef who was in charge of 27 restaurants of the Taj. Who created menus like no other, who dreamed up umpteen unique recipes, who travelled the world honing his skill, putting his restaurants on the world culinary map. Not just that, there were the banquets, too. All kinds of celebrations, marriages and



A Tomato Get-together



Cry-o-pac Three Mushroom Ravioli



Betterava



Brie & Truffle Soufflé

anniversaries, birthdays and engagements, corporate dos, that required his skill and input in making functions talked about. For what is a celebration if the food is not talked about! Hemant is actually a legend of sorts, a king among chefs, who has actually fed kings and premiers, political heads, actors and rockstars and God knows who else. I am not surprised when strangers walk up to him after a satisfied dinner at *Hemant Oberoi* these days and say, “Sir, you won’t remember but 20 years ago, you gave us some great food at my wedding at the Taj. We still remember it.”

I was at his restaurant, talking shop, when I enquired, ‘How would you define your present cuisine’, Hemant gave a hint of a smile and said, “I have actually redefined it now. I don’t call it fine dining, I call it ‘refine’ dining.” And he means it. He has taken all his past creations and jiggled them up. Changing a method here, a base there, an oil perhaps, perhaps the structure, added an ingredient, subtracted

some. 25% of the menu is Peruvian inspired, while 75% is European. “Look, I don’t hesitate to say *Zodiac Grill* was my weakness, my strength. I put in a lot of passion in the menu there. So it’s only natural that I can’t allow all that to die.” I couldn’t agree more. With the death of *Zodiac Grill*, Hemant Oberoi has risen like the phoenix. Now we can all dine here, at new and more affordable rates. It’s a win-win situation.

For critics who look at running down chefs for no real reason except to show they know more, I only have this much to say. If we can afford to pay \$200 for similar fare when we dine overseas, why feel the pinch paying an equivalent of about a \$100 here. Any answers? For that is what it will cost for a dinner for two at *Hemant Oberoi*. For all the rumours floating around, the most expensive item on the menu is the lamb shanks and that costs about ₹1400. Certainly worth it! They taste as good also because the meat comes from New Zealand, and there are various charges involved in importing products; packaging, air freight, customs duty, etc.

But let’s leave that to individual tastes and opinions, I’d like to talk about the food I ate at *Hemant Oberoi*. French cooking is Hemant’s mainstay. And my dinner could not be better. The *Camembert Dariole* is now simply called *Brie Soufflé*. With a delicate hint of truffle, it’s like a dream that enters your mouth. Even as you allow the divine airiness to subside in your mouth. The dichotomy while consuming this starter is you want to eat it faster, it is that good, but you know you have to go slow to savour it fully. To be honest, I can eat this soufflé as all three courses and go home and sleep

with a smile on my face. But I have a job to do and it involves, ahem, tasting as much as I can. So here I go.

I ate a delicately steamed and butter-braised *Lobster Tail*, with a bisque, the taste of which still lingers in my memory. Being a tomato junkie, I did have the *Tomato Get-together*, but it was the *Three Mushroom Ravioli* that really impressed. Earlier, meaning a few days before I was at dinner, I was at the restaurant to just shoot some pictures of the food and this *ravioli* in a can was one of them. I did think to myself, is Hemant getting gimmicky or what, but believe me when the steward did prise open the can at the table the night I was dining there, I was totally blown. The *ravioli* was made the same morning and canned. So the juices all sit there marinating and when it is ordered for, it is put into an oven and allowed to come to a right temperature and then brought to the table, where, when opened, offers a burst of fragrant truffle oil which hits the right spot. The old school friend sitting opposite me went, ‘Wow,



Melon Gazpacho



Perfect creations by Hemant Oberoi



The grand interiors comprise of polished teakwood, the overall effect at Hemant Oberoi is very dramatic



The alluring bar at Hemant Oberoi



Three Milk Parfait



Rose petal ice-cream



Chocolate Mille-feuille

orgasmic’! Yeah, I second that. So the *ravioli* is laid carefully on a sauce of pickle and sage butter which had been poured into the plates seconds before the can was opened. The three mushrooms; *porcini*, *shiitake* and the humble *button* work like magic. Vegetarians, rejoice.

The *Raspberry Sorbet* cleansed my palate and readied me for my main course which was the *Lamb Shank*. Tender, juicy, slow-cooked. Braised for over two hours, with the right accompaniment; *kabucha* mash and pumpkin seed with Panca chilli. I always like more of the *jus*, so I asked for some more. There was an apology from Hemant who said the gravy boat should have been sent alongside.

And that’s the thing. Hemant now wears other hats, too, though come to think of it I have never seen him wear a toque. He is at the restaurant right till it closes, totally hands-on keeping an eye on everything. Along with being the owner-chef, he now looks into purchases, infrastructure, man power, HR, customer lists, reservations, administration, the works. What is admirable is he does not shy away from anything. If at all he is proud of it. This is after all his personal venture. And notwithstanding long hours, his sense of humour is intact, “If in those

days it was a question of less sleep, these days it is that of sleepless nights.” So now you have Hemant leave home at 8.30 am and return at 2 am.

So where does that leave Mallika, his wife of 38 years. I have known Mallika, a gem of a woman, for as long as I have Hemant, which is more than three decades. ‘How do you feel about Hemant being at it, all over again’, I asked her. Just as it is Hemant’s habit, Mallika, too, gives a slow, long smile and replies, “You know when we came from Delhi to Taj Bombay 31 years ago, Hemant looked at me very sweetly and said, ‘Mallika, today I am going to ask something of you, will you please give it to me’, and he went on to ask me for ‘some time’. He said, ‘give me some time to settle in and then we will see’.” “The ‘some time’ is still going on,” she says with a laugh and adds, “but no complaints, he has to do what he has to do, all I want is he should look after his health.” Anyone who knows Mallika knows what a good and charitable human being she is, and with support like this, what more can a man ask.

Well, enthusiastically as ever, Hemant says, “If you are tired, you are retired, I am not tired and don’t want to retire!”

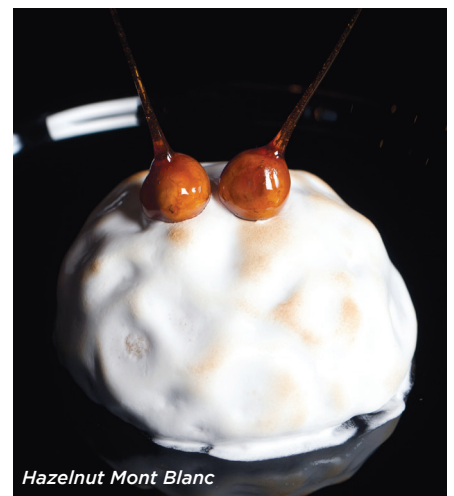
So that’s settled. Foodies stay tuned. The handsome teak and polish, upscale,



Duck Liver Torchon



*Chocolate Shawarma
conjured by Hemant Oberoi*



Hazelnut Mont Blanc

luxurious *Hemant Oberoi* is all set to welcome you to indulge yourself in unique dining experiences that are borne of passion and decades of experience. So go ahead, enjoy, while I share more good news. Hemant's older son, Siddharth will soon be joining him, and three cheers to that! I think an element of young blood will only further boost dad Hemant's positive streak and we have everything to gain from that.

Bon Appétit, then.

Hemant Oberoi

Unit No. 5, Ground Floor,
Jet Airways, Godrej Building,
BKC, Mumbai 400051
Ph: 022 2653 4757 / 2653 4767

