



The Accent is on Taste

Hard work never fails. And when talent, creativity, dedication, determination and zeal are the other ingredients in the pot, the outcome will prove to be nothing short of the magical. Meet Chef Manish Mehrotra, a busy man on the block

Text: **Farzana Contractor** Photographs: **Rohit Chawla (food) & Vijay Barathe (Chef Manish)**

What must it feel like to be in Manish Mehrotra's skin right now? Or walk in his shoes even as he darts into the various airports of the world, catching flights to and fro international gourmet cities? Be it to have a *dekho* at his restaurants in London (*Chor Bizarre*) and New York, or pick up international awards or cook at pop ups somewhere exotique!

Methinks, the title of the Culinary King currently goes to Chef Manish Mehrotra and deservedly so. Very quietly and assiduously he has been pampering the palates of the rich and the famous, catering also to the needs of lesser mortals, not necessarily the swish set, albeit, the true blue foodies who enjoy equally, and perhaps more so, their *foie gras* and caviar, downed by elegant sips of chilled bubbly. Did you say bubbly? Yes that's right, champagne and wine go well with this chef's Indian cookin'! The spin he has given to his *desi* menu, the twist he had added with ingredients from around the world, with more than just an 'accent', totally justifies what he has invented and addresses as Modern Indian food.

So how must Chef Mehrotra feel? Busy

as he is, sought after as he is? With the stars of *Indian Accent* rising or shall we say multiplying, with hardly any time to even wipe the sweat off his brows.

"Oh gosh, I am loving it all!" exclaims Chef Mehrotra, as he walks down a street in New York, at 2 am, at the end of what has been a very, very, busy Saturday night at *Indian Accent*, New York. And no I am not trotting behind him. I am, in fact, comfortably ensconced in an armchair, in my apartment in Bombay, sipping tea, chatting with him on a pleasant Sunday morning while he is walking home alone, probably tired as hell.

I have to admit I was feeling bad to put him through this long, long distance interview after a hard day's work, but chef did not seem to mind at all. He was full of beans as he disclosed, "This is my routine. I walk home every night, when done. It's just a 20 minute walk and in New York, you can easily do such things." Really? I wouldn't. But then in such matters I am quite a funk. In the mountains, even with the knowledge that wild beasts are around, I feel safe, but not in cities. The chef is a brave man. Definitely at home in New York.

If you have not been reading too much about Chef Mehrotra all these years, is because he is not one of those 'in your face' chefs. He likes to remain in the background, much like the chef he first worked under, at Taj President (now Taj Vivanta), his culinary mentor of sorts, Chef Ananda Solomon, an unassuming genius. Or like Rohit Khattar, India's most low profile restaurateur and most successful restaurateur/entrepreneur, whose team Chef Mehrotra became a part of, way back in 2000.

Rohit Khattar still prefers it that way and continues to remain elusive but with times that are a-changing, Chef Mehrotra has no choice but to give in to media demands, what with the opening of their New York establishment. Yes, *Indian Accent* is creating a buzz in the Big Apple since the past nine months. With the accolades that are coming their way, before long, I suspect there will be another *Indian Accent* opening somewhere; Dubai? Bombay? London? Who knows. For now, check what Monika Patel, our NY correspondent has to say about her dining experience at the restaurant. It's on the last page of this feature.

But let's hear it from the chef, too, "So what do you have to say about your new foray, Chef Mehrotra?" I hear a siren blaring in the background as the chef says, "Wasn't easy. Actually, it was tough. New York is not an easy market. The diner here is savvy and won't settle for the mediocre. The expectation level, the high standards that are set, all contribute to the angst of any chef opening a new restaurant. I was no different. I rose to the challenge, I wanted to excel. Bring to the diner the diverse tastes that comprise Indian cuisines. I am on a mission to showcase India's diversity. You know, you understand what we have in our repertoire, food that goes way beyond what the world has come to believe is Indian food. I knew I was on test because the food I was going to dish out has no reference point in the existing culinary milieu in New York. *Indian Accent's* forte is the balance we bring to every dish, where spices are concerned. We don't go overboard in our quest to marry ingredients. There has to be a good construction, great compatibility

on the palate. And we take so much pride and joy in plating the food attractively and creatively. Presentation is very important to us. And the months gone by has proved we did well, by the grace of God."

Well, most of us agree that Indian food for the most times does not look as good as it tastes, so that must take some fair amount of skill. Little wonder that New Yorkers are so enamoured by the fare. They are surprised that Indian food can look and taste so. Take a bow Manish! I am indeed happy to learn that more than 60% of your customers are intrinsically American, which in my book means you have passed the test, with flying colours.

But it has come at a cost. Hard work and more hard work and no holidays and no time for friends and family. And being away from home at most festivals, including Diwali! "Ya, but I will not complain. I have chosen this life," says he. To which I add "And you did well in finding a soulmate in Vidya, a chef, when you first met her, working across from

you in *Konkan Café*, when at *Thai Pavilion* and marrying her. She understands what it is to be a chef, huh?" Chef Mehrotra gives a hearty laugh and thanks his stars, but also adds. "However I have a daughter, Adah, all of 9, who is now threatening that she plans to become a food critic. Enough of chefs in the family, she says! I am frightened but am waiting to serve her when she does morph into one!"

I don't see much trouble there. The way in which Chef Mehrotra conducts himself, the effort he puts in keeping abreast with world food, in following which ingredient is going where, in reading cookbooks from all over, travelling to new restaurants, cooking

up new recipes, in his mind, in the kitchen, learning, learning, learning, all the time, he just can't go wrong.

This input, about Chef Mehrotra's dedication, I culled from Rohit Khattar who I had called to ask what he feels about Chef Manish Mehrotra. Anyone who knows Rohit will know that he is among the best to have as a boss. He leaves you be, after he is done with conceptualising and putting plans at work. The creative and business force behind *Old World Hospitality* and I don't know how many other verticals to his company, Rohit is an extraordinary man. More on him another time (if he will allow



Panko-crusted Bharwan Mirch, Goat Cheese Mousse, Chilli Aam Papad



Whipping it up at a pop-up at Magazine Street Kitchen



Baked Paneer Pinwheel, Indian Coriander Pesto

it), but for now, this is why he has to say, “Manish is extremely talented. He is the only chef I know who just can’t get a dish wrong, even if he tried! He has the ability to see a new dish and figure out every nuance about that dish. Like a composer creating a theme in his mind, Manish will mix and marry ingredients in his mind and tell you whether this or that will work or not work, that’s his mastery. All Manish does is dream of new dishes and work at

changing menus frequently. It’s *kismet*, I feel blessed to have such hugely talented chefs working with me. I respect them and give them their creative freedom.” Like I said there can’t be a better boss.

Chef Manish Mehrotra hails from Patna. He was born there, he grew up there. But he came to Bombay to pursue a Hotel Management degree, with stars in his eyes. Like he says, “...because Bombay held that kind of an aura. It was a dream city for us,

then.” It was while studying here that he developed a penchant for food production and he changed tack from becoming a corporate executive to going the executive chef way.

I guess the chef was fortunate that his first boss was Chef Ananda Solomon. Straight out of college, that is where young Manish Mehrotra landed as a trainee. Working at the *Thai Pavilion* must have been a daunting job. Don’t forget, this was almost 20 years ago and the knowledge of Thai ingredients was not common. Both, for diners and young chefs. Says the recently retired (alas), Chef Ananda (among our favourite chefs), “Manish worked under me a long time ago, for a short time, like a year and a half or so. But I did notice he was very passionate. And he worked very hard. Thai was a pretty alien cuisine at that time but Manish adapted very well. He wanted to develop, do well and I can see he has.” Well, the master has speaketh.

And as an endorsement to his hard work, let me tell you, Manish has grated 70 coconuts a day, at *Thai Pavilion*. Let us say his grounding came via grating and all is well that ends

well. Today he is a champion in Pan-Asian cooking, too.

But how did this come about?

Well, after his time at Taj, Chef Mehrotra joined Old World Hospitality. Rohit Khattar was himself raring to go and he was certainly Delhi’s blue-eyed boy. I remember, it was in 2000 when I was in Delhi at *Oriental Octopus*, shooting photographs of (a reluctant) Rohit and eating a meal cooked by a much younger Chef Mehrotra at his lovely restaurant situated at India Habitat Centre. Habitat was on the road to becoming a huge entertainment hotspot, thanks to Rohit’s vision. It was at that time that Manish Mehrotra embarked upon a nine-year culinary adventure travelling across Asia to understand Pan-Asian fare. It was upon his return, in 2009, armed with immense knowledge and culinary expertise that *Indian Accent* was launched. Though, he was not the person Rohit had picked for the job. Reminisces Rohit, “Strange, and it was just very coincidental that Manish was present at the meeting when plans were being finalised to go ahead with *Indian Accent*. That is when Manish came to me and said, ‘Sir, please give me this restaurant. I want to do it.’ I was surprised, ‘I said, ‘Are you sure? You like Pan-Asian cooking... Well, I said, ‘fine, take it’. He created masterpieces and the rest is history! It’s *kismet*,” signs off Rohit, using his favourite word.

Well known history that *Indian Accent* in Delhi became a rage, in due course of time. It redefined the gourmet scene of Delhi. Food served was unique. ‘Inventive Indian cuisine’ became the new definition. Well, denying the *Dillivalas* their staple butter chicken and incorporating fresh ways of combining traditional Indian food with world ingredients was a runaway success. The creative presentation was taken to another level. *Pani puri* never looked better. It was worthy of being replicated into a painting!

Indian Accent, with careful handling of the emphasis on ‘accent’ was a path-breaker, alright. For it is widely known and understood that fusion and marriage between a cuisine and international ingredients can make or break. But after all these years, even today, its menu comprises of what captured the imagination of diners eight years ago. *Meetha Aachar Spare*



Galangal-infused Patrani Mekong Basa, Tomato Shorba Essence

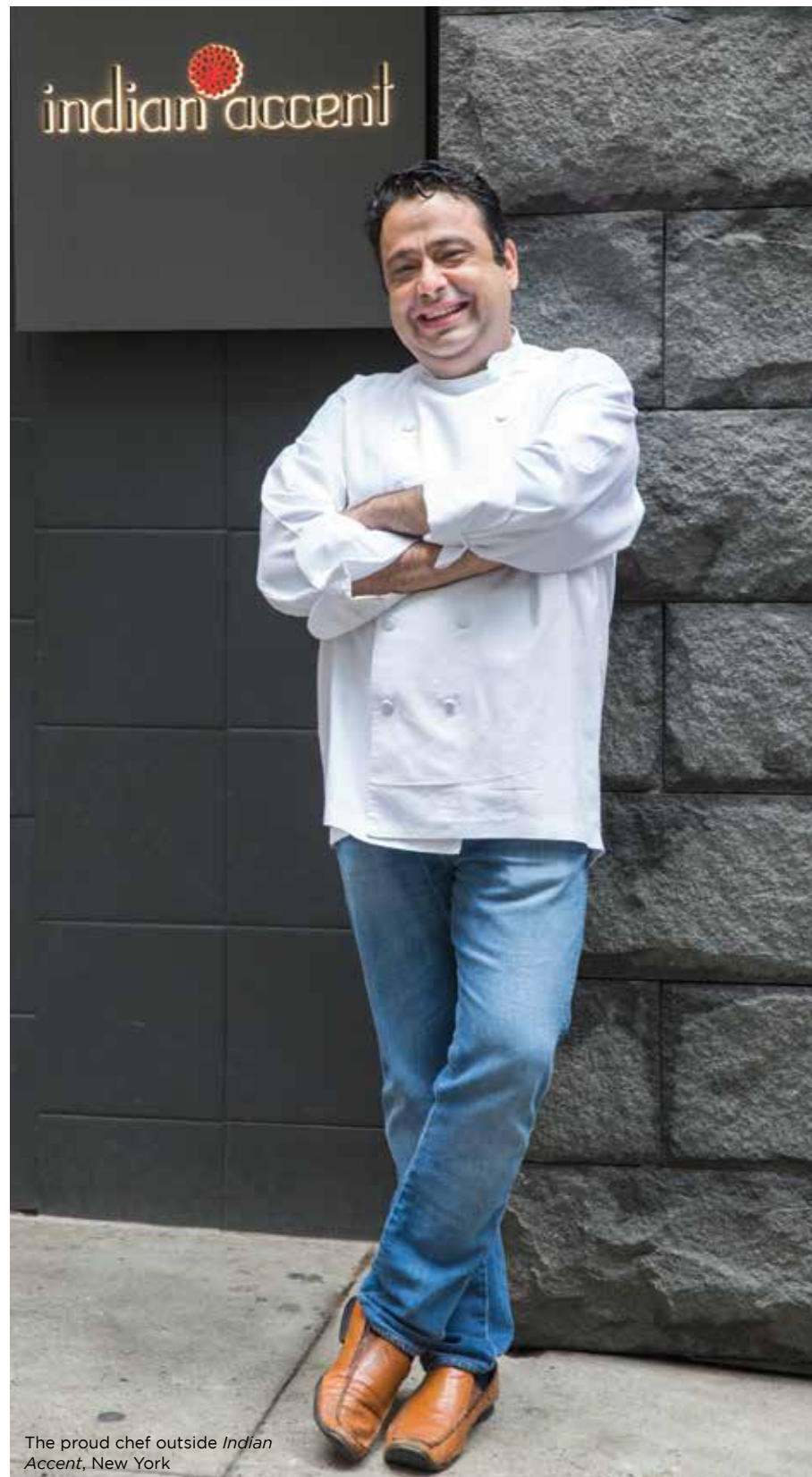


Wholemeal and Semolina Puchkas, Masala Cous Cous, Five Waters



Roast Scallops Balchao, Saboodana Papad, Kokum Powder





The proud chef outside *Indian Accent*, New York



Pulled Kathal Phulka Taco

Ribs and *Warm Doda Barfi Treacle Tart* still stands proud on the menu, all these years. A menu which the chef is known to change often, as much as every quarter. Chef Manish has a soft spot for his restaurant in Delhi, “But of course, it’s my baby. I am certainly sentimental about it.” And to those who worry what happens to the restaurant when he is travelling and ask him, who cooks when he is not there, this is his reply, “The same chefs who cook when I am there!”

In this lies the chef’s greatness. Let me explain. Chef Manish Mehrotra is one chef who lets others on to all that he knows. He does not hide from anyone what he has learned through painstaking experience. On the contrary, he is only too happy to share his expertise and culinary details. “He is a great trainer, a large-hearted chef who generously shares his knowledge with everyone,” Rohit Khattar had said to me earlier.

“If I don’t teach, how will I learn?” asks the chef. “If I hide, how will I progress?” he questions again. “That’s the only way I can move forward, open new restaurants... Training, teaching young and enthusiastic people is very important,” concludes Chef Mehrotra. In turn I conclude two things.

You can rest assured Chef Shantanu Mehrotra, yes same surname, no relation, who has been with Old World Hospitality for over 15 years, will offer high level sensory pleasures to you in Delhi, *Indian Accent*, whether or not Chef Manish Mehrotra is around and two, I can safely bet, *Indian Accent* will announce its grand opening in London by the summer of next year!

Bon Appétit folks, nice to know, India has truly arrived on the international culinary map.

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Plum Cake

From the City's Top Bakers

Mayonnaise

The Mother Sauce

Metros

Bombay Buzz, Dishy Delhi, Bangalore Bites, Poona Postings, Madras Munchings

It's a Life I Chose and I Love It
Corporate Chef Manish Mehrotra