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A Tale Of Two Chefs

Legendary chefs Satish Arora and Arvind Saraswat changed the face of Indian restaurants forever. Every time you eat at an Indian hotel today, at least something on the menu can be directly attributed to their influence

PHOTO: RAJ K RAJ

FOR THE last month or so, I have been helping Air India (which now means the old Air India plus the old Indian Airlines) with its inflight cuisine, largely as a labour of love on the part of a passenger of many decades standing. While that adventure will have to wait for a future *Rude Food* (let the menus be introduced first!), one of the more enjoyable byproducts of this exercise is that I have been interacting with the two most influential chefs in the recent history of Indian cuisine.

If you are a foodie or are involved in the food business, then neither Satish Arora nor Arvind Saraswat will require any introduction. For the rest of you, this is who they are: Satish Arora became executive chef of the Taj Bombay (which then constituted the entire chain) in 1973 when he was just 26. He was the pioneer of a new generation of catering college-trained chefs who transformed the way kitchens were run. Arvind Saraswat was Arora's contemporary at the Delhi catering college but started out as his junior at the Bombay Taj. Arvind's period of glory began with the opening of the Delhi Taj in 1978. It continued through the opening of the Taj Bengal in 1989 and various other hotels.

Between them, these two men have changed the face of Indian restaurants forever. If you go out for dinner today, it is a fair assumption that at least something on the menu will be directly attributable to the influence of either Arora or Saraswat.

Of the two, I've known Arora for the longest period of time - since 1976 in fact. At that stage, he was a young chef struggling to prove himself in the Taj kitchen. Arora is now the elder statesman of his profession, but he still remains the same sort of person: happiest when cooking with his hands, eager to please and ready to experiment.

I met Arvind Saraswat a little later (when the Taj Palace opened in 1982) and he was already being referred to as the best chef in India because of the success of the restaurants at the Taj Marhsingh. Arvind is as uneager to please as Satish is eager. In demeanour, he resembles one of those romantic, aloof, aristocratic French chefs (he is good looking enough to have modelled in Taj ads in the 1980s where he pretended to be a customer rather than a chef) who treats cooking as a cerebral exercise and has a detached contempt for those members of his profession who do not meet his high standards.

In the 1970s and 1980s when Arora and Saraswat reigned, India was a very different place. Food and wine imports were either banned outright or discouraged by prohibitive duties. Indians had no experience of eating out. When our parents went for an Indian meal they went to a Kwaliti-style Punjabi restaurant. When they wanted Chinese, it was bland Cantonese cuisine (massively adapted for Indian



INAUTHENTIC
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tastes) that they were served. French cuisine was largely unknown and represented by a strange animal called 'Conti' for Continental, which consisted of the stodgy dishes that chefs in the west had long since stopped making. It was impossible to get an authentic pizza in India because nobody had access to *Mozzarella* or any other kind of Italian cheese. Pasta meant macaroni with processed cheese or spaghetti with *keema* curry.

Of today's hotel chains, it is ITC which prides itself on the quality of its Indian food. The Oberois don't give a damn and are busy closing down their Indian restaurants. And the Taj is astonishingly reluctant to take credit for the revolution in Indian restaurant cuisine. But it was almost entirely the Taj group's creation.

When they first started serving Indian food in the Apollo Room at the Bombay Taj in the 1960s, customers complained that it tasted nothing like the stuff they were used to at Gaylord, Kwaliti and Volga. The Taj was the only hotel chain not to be run by

rude food

REGIONAL BIAS
It was Arora's kitchen that first started serving *dosas* and *idlis* on the room service breakfast menu



Punjabis (think about it: the Oberoies are Sardarjis; ITDC was Punjabi-run; ITC was run by Punjabis from ITDC and the Oberoies; and everything else was owned by people called Lamba, Ghai or Gujral). So its then management (chiefly, the Tatas, Ajit Kerkar and Camellia Panjabi who despite her name is a Sindhi) persisted with the formulation of a different cuisine.

By the time Tanjore opened at the Bombay Taj in 1972 (on Arora's watch), the chain had made it clear that it was not going to go down the Kwaliti-Moghul Room route favoured by the Oberoi group. The *kababs* were made by cooks from Old Delhi. The cuisine included the recipes of home cooking. And there was a strong regional bias to the menu. No

SATISH ARORA
Now the elder statesman of his profession, Arora still remains the same sort of person: eager to please and ready to experiment

ARVIND SARASWAT
Certainly, Saraswat (left) was the only Indian chef who knew what *nouvelle cuisine* was



ARORA CREATED A COFFEE SHOP MENU THAT WENT BEYOND THE CLUB SANDWICH CLICHÉS OF HOTEL CUISINE

longer was the kitchen run on the basis of three curries to which you added mutton, chicken *tikka*, cream, *dahi*, more cream and a garnish of hard-boiled egg. This was real Indian food, rediscovered by people with a feel for the cuisine.

The Taj followed it up with other innovations. Till then, all five star hotels had been copies of Delhi's Oberoi Intercontinental which was pretty much a standard Third World Hilton / Sheraton / Intercontinental property with a menu flown out from middle America. It was Arora's kitchen that first started serving *dosas* and *idlis* on the room service breakfast menu. (Fill then, you got eggs, steak and pancakes on the American pattern.)

So it was with the coffee shop menu. The new Taj in Bombay was designed by Dale Keller, who also designed the new Oberoi hotels. Unlike the Oberoies, however, the Taj customised Keller's designs. For instance, he had recommended that the coffee shop be called Canopy. The Taj took the basic idea, hung Ra-



CHINESE WHISPERS
Many of the flavours we now associate with Chinese food first travelled to north India via the House of Ming

PHOTO: ANAND SHINDE



jasthani and Gujarati drapes from the roof instead and called it Shamiana. (That version of the Shamiana died some years ago, alas.)

Arora took on the challenge of creating a coffee shop menu that went beyond the chicken-in-the-basket and club sandwich clichés of hotel cuisine. The Shamiana's Indian section was full of unusual dishes, many of them sourced from the streets of Bombay. The mutton and egg *gotala* of Mohammad Ali Road was adapted for the menu and so were many Gujarati and Parsi dishes.

Walk into any Indian hotel today and you will find that they are serving *dosas* and regional Indian dishes in the coffee shop and on room service. No hotel restaurant would dare serve a Kwaliti-type Indian menu today. (Even the Oberoies were shamed into closing down The Moghul Rooms and replacing them with ITC rip-offs called Kandahar.)

All this would have been impossible if Arora and the Taj had not broken with precedent and dared to create a different kind of hotel cuisine. Each time you see a *paav bhaji* on a menu or order an *aaloo puri* for breakfast, you are paying tribute to Arora's influence.

Sadly, the Taj did not persist with one of Arora's greatest innovations. He invented the chicken *tikka* sandwich, a full decade before it went on sale all over England. Unfortunately he only put it on the room service menu and called it, with a staggering lack of imagination, the Room Service Special. (By the way, he does a terrific chicken *khurchan* sandwich which the Taj flight kitchen loads on to Indian Airlines flights at tea time.)

In that era, chefs did everything and dabbled in every kind of cuisine. Arora had started out as a 'Conti chef' (at Delhi's catering college, he was the chief *chamcha* of the great Roger Moncourt who would come and lecture to the students) but quickly adapted to Indian food. In 1973 when the Taj opened the Golden Dragon and brought Sichuan food to India, he suddenly had to learn Chinese cooking as well. The Hong Kong chefs who ran the restaurant were temperamental and frequently walked out. Arora trained his own cooks to make the same food. One day, when the chefs stalked out, the kitchen operated as though things were normal. No



CAMELLIA PANJABI
Ajit Kerkar, Camellia, Arora and Saraswat drove across Italy stealing the best dishes from every restaurant



PAUL BOCUSE
Such legends of the 1970s as Bocuse came and cooked at the Rendezvous at the Taj

INDULGE



SAY CHEESE

In the '70s and '80s, it was impossible to get an authentic pizza in India because nobody had access to any kind of Italian cheese



SPICE ROUTE

Nelson Wang (below) says he invented Chicken Manchurian (above) because guests suddenly started asking for spicy Chinese food, having eaten at the Taj's Golden Dragon. Sweet corn soup with crab meat simply did not cut it any longer



guest could tell the difference. The chastened Chinamen returned and the Taj had no more trouble with them after that.

It's funny how Arora and Saraswat are both inextricably linked to the story of Chinese food in India despite having had no interest in the cuisine to begin with. Like Arora, Saraswat was a 'Conti chef.' Unlike Arora, however, he had the opportunity to go and work at the best restaurants in France, England and Italy. He was startled to handle quality ingredients. He still remembers how shocked he was when he saw chefs in England adding cream straight to the pan. In Indian kitchens in those days, you could never take that risk because the cream had been adulterated and diluted and would very likely split in the pan.

Saraswat became chef at the Rendezvous at the Bombay Taj, probably the only genuine French restaurant in India. Certainly, he was the only Indian chef who knew what nouvelle cuisine was because not only did the Taj send him to Michelin starred restaurants in France but such legends of the 1970s as Paul Bocuse came and cooked at the Rendezvous.

When the Taj readied to take on the mighty Oberoi Intercontinental in Delhi in 1978, it assembled the strongest ever team that any hotel could have had. Ramesh Johar was general manager and Arvind Saraswat was chef. It is a measure of how seriously the Taj took the challenge that Saraswat spent several months cooking in Italy before opening the Casa Medici. Then, Kerker, Camellia, Arora and Saraswat drove across Italy stealing the best dishes from every restaurant.

Haveli, the Indian restaurant, represented a particular challenge. Could a hotel serve non-Punjabi food in a Punjabi city? Saraswat scoured India for recipes, many of which (such as *achar gosht*, introduced for the first time at Haveli) were completely unfamiliar to Delhiites.

At the coffee shop, Machan, Saraswat brought some of the Shamiana's greatest hits but also added trademark dishes of his own such as the Burmese Mah-Mi soup which is still on the menu, decades later.

But the real importance of the food at the Taj Mansingh lies in the influence it had on Chinese cuisine in India. The Golden Dragon had made Bombay's Cantonese restaurateurs sit up and take note - Nelson Wang says he invented Chicken Manchurian because guests suddenly started asking for spicy Chinese food, having eaten at the Dragon. Sweet corn soup with crab meat simply did not cut it any longer.

But, five years after the Golden Dragon had taken Bombay and Madras (a Dragon opened in Madras in 1974 at the Taj Coromandel) by storm, Delhi was still immune to the spicy flavours of Sichuan. Chinese food at such restaurants as Chungwa and Fujiya was dull and stodgy. The epitome of Chinese cuisine was Mandarin at the Janpath hotel which served acceptable but entirely inauthentic Chinese restaurant food.

Arvind had some experience of Chinese food - he was executive chef of the Coromandel in Madras which had a Golden Dragon. But he was never terribly keen on it. Nevertheless, from the day the House of Ming, the Dragon equivalent in Delhi, opened its doors, he realised that Sichuan cuisine would be the hotel's calling card.

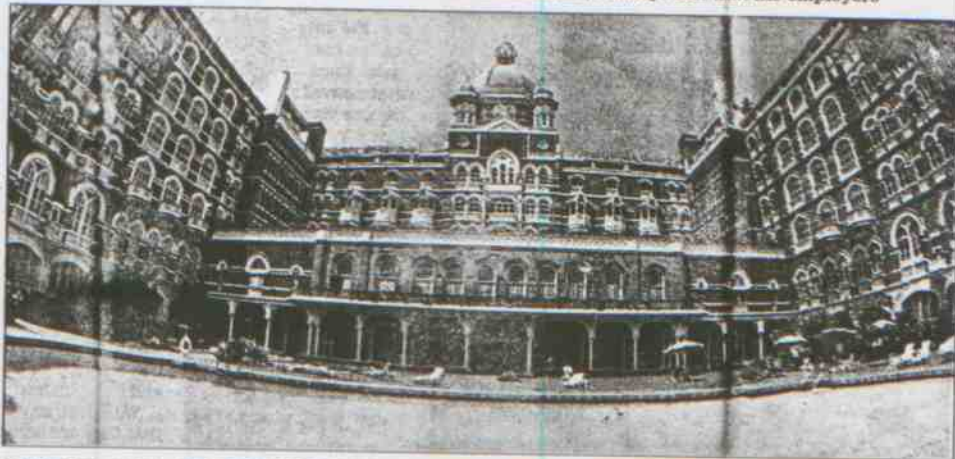
Many of the flavours we now associate with Chinese food in India and certainly, the thick red gravies that mix so well with rice, first travelled to north India via the House of Ming. Within months of the restaurant's opening, every Chinese restaurant in Delhi had begun to put the new dishes on the menu. As most of the ethnic Chinese restaurateurs in the Capital were India-born and bred, never having travelled further east than Chowringhee, they had no idea of how to recreate the flavours of Sichuan cui-

sine. So they upped the chilli content, made every sauce red and threw in lots of cornflour. In the process, the bastard creation that is junk Chinese in India was born.

Arora gave up running the Bombay Taj. Arvind first oversaw the opening of the Taj Palace and then opted for a less hands-on role. Both chefs were given grand but largely meaningless designations. They first became Chefs Culinaires (Arvind confesses that he made up the name and sold it to Ajit Kerker) and then Directors of Food Production, a bizarre title that makes them sound like assembly line managers at a Maggi noodles factory.

But neither stopped cooking or inventing. Arora created the big budget banquet that the Bombay Taj now specialises in. Arvind turned up in Calcutta in 1987. I lived in the city then and assured him that people in Calcutta did not eat out. He opened three wildly successful restaurants that were packed out night after night and laughed in my face. In his own way, he changed the eating out culture of Calcutta as well.

I suspect that for the last decade or so the Taj group has not known what to do with its biggest stars. Arora turned the flight kitchen around and while it has been a pleasure to deal with him again over the Air India meals, I always feel that his employers



THE TAJ IS ASTONISHINGLY RELUCTANT TO TAKE CREDIT FOR THE REVOLUTION IN INDIAN RESTAURANT CUISINE

wasted his talents in the later phase of his career. Arvind is a great teacher and the Taj used him to train chefs. Plus he wrote two books that are now standard texts for chefs. But he never got to open the Indian restaurant that he had dreamed of. (He had even designed the menus.)

But I guess that the kind of influence these two men have had brings its own rewards. Within the Taj they used to complain that both Arora and Saraswat never encouraged juniors. I did not agree. In those days if you went to a Taj restaurant, liked the food and asked to meet the chef, the man who had actually cooked it would be sent to your table. These days, at most five star hotels, the executive chef himself turns up and pretends he's cooked everything. And I think that time has proven me right. Wherever in the world you go, you will bump into ex-Taj chefs who will tell you that they learnt everything from Arora or Saraswat. These chefs have no reason to lie. And to be consistently rated as gurus to whole generations of chefs is a greater reward than any designation or pay rise.

Then, there's the food itself. Of how many chefs, anywhere in the world, can it be said that they changed the way in which restaurant menus are written? Auguste Escoffier, perhaps. Paul Bocuse, in a certain era, you could argue. And that's about it.

But every time you eat at an Indian hotel, each time you order a Sichuan meal, and whenever you see a regional dish on a North Indian menu, you encounter the influence of Satish Arora and Arvind Saraswat.

Who could ask for a greater legacy?