

## columns

VIR  
SANGHVI

{ rude food }

# Return of the native

Atul Kochhar is one of the world's most respected Indian chefs but success in his homeland has eluded him. That may be about to change

If you think about famous Indian chefs cooking abroad, the first name that comes to mind is usually Gaggan Anand. And, certainly no Indian chef has had the same kind of global success as Anand: Best Restaurant in Asia for several years in a row, among the top three restaurants in the world, two Michelin stars, his own episode of Chef's Table, etc.

But the generation before Gaggan's has had its own stars, who worked hard to make Indian food acceptable in the West. In New York, late Floyd Cardoz won respect for our cuisine. And in London, two chefs won Michelin stars in the same year, 2001, making them the first Indian chefs anywhere in the world to be starred by Michelin.

Of the two, Vineet Bhatia is probably better-known in India, partly because he has a very successful restaurant at The Oberoi, in Mumbai, and because he has done TV shows directed at Indian audiences. Moreover, Vineet has a global presence, with restaurants all over the world which gives him greater international recognition.

Less known in India, but a huge star in the UK is Atul Kochhar who won his Michelin star the same year as Vineet and has done much to help Indian food gain acclaim in the UK, not just through his restaurants but also through a massive media profile on television and in the press.

Kochhar has just opened a restaurant in Delhi-NCR and once the lockdown ends in the UK, we will probably see more of him in India. Plus, he has a successful Indian restaurant in London (Kanishka) and will open a second one, called

Mathura, as soon as the pandemic recedes.

If you speak to anyone who is part of the British food scene, either a chef or a food writer, Kochhar's is the one name they will all recognise. Some of this has to do with his status as the first Indian chef to break through beyond the Indian food fraternity and become regarded as a celebrity chef (though I am not sure that this is a term he likes) on par with French and British chefs in the UK.

Kochhar (like Vineet) worked for the Oberoi group when he was hired by a wealthy Delhi family who were Oberoi regulars, to open Tamarind in London. In those days (1993-94), the London Indian food scene was dead. There was



## BREAK NEW GROUND

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the Bombay Brasserie, the Taj group outpost opened by Camellia Panjabi, and Chutney Mary opened by her sister, Namita. There was also the Red Fort opened by Bangladeshi restaurateur Amin Ali, though it catered to very different tastes. Otherwise, nearly every other 'Indian' restaurant was a curry house.

Kochhar was given a prime location in Mayfair and tasked with serving a North Indian (heavily Punjabi) menu by his

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### GET INTO GEAR

**Chef Atul started exploring local ingredients, and went beyond the pomfret that Indian kitchens preferred at that time**

proprietors. It worked well enough, he says, till his father, a Punjabi who had settled in Bihar, came to eat the food. To Kochhar's horror, he was scathing about the London version of Punjabi cuisine that his son was serving at his restaurant. It was neither this nor that, his father told him; neither authentically Indian nor particularly tasty.

Kochhar says that this was one of the factors that prodded him to develop his own style of cooking. He started exploring local ingredients, and went beyond the pomfret that Indian kitchens preferred at the time. He experimented with salmon, sea bass and other local British fish. He tried using English lamb rather than goat. And so on.

It worked well enough for him to get a Michelin star and by the time he left Tamarind, nine years later, it was firmly established.

Kochhar's next venture was entrepreneurial. He partnered with someone from the financial services industry to open the massive Benares, (twice the size of Tamarind) in one of London's most expensive locations: Berkeley Square.

It began badly when the partners ran out of money and opened an unfinished restaurant. But Benares stabilised in a couple of years, by which time Kochhar had refined his style further, moving away from the Tamarind menu of Punjabi flavours with high-quality ingredients to offer his own take on the food of the rest of India.

Benares won a Michelin star and Kochhar soon became a regular fixture on the TV scene, appearing on shows like *The Great British Menu* and *Million Pound Menu*. He had completed the transition from being perceived as an Indian chef to being seen as a Michelin-starred London chef who cooked Indian food.

Kochhar made the most of his success, pushing the envelope further and further. He made it his mission to promote the idea of drinking high-quality wine with Indian food. He would travel to vineyards, stay at their wineries, offer to cook for the owners and then ask them to find wines that would pair well with his food. Many winemakers did special blends for him that were masala-friendly.

All went well till a couple of years ago, when a tweet sent out by Kochhar about an episode of Priyanka Chopra's *Quantico* TV show created a Twitter storm. Many people thought it was anti-Islamic in tone, a response that shocked Kochhar, who had a restaurant in Dubai and has always worked with people of all religions in his kitchens. He said, as the uproar escalated, that it was an unthinking tweet, poorly



### OPEN DOORS

**Atul Kochhar makes a comeback to India with his restaurant, Saga, in Delhi-NCR**

phrased and that people may have been right to object to. He issued unconditional apologies and the row died down.

But there was collateral damage. The hotel where his Dubai restaurant was located ended their association, and more damagingly, he was forced out of Benares by his partner. Obviously there was more to that separation than a tweet and Kochhar says he felt betrayed by a man he had regarded as a close friend.

But nothing keeps a good chef down. Kochhar bounced back with a new partner and opened Kanishka, a stone's throw from Benares. Once again, he changed his style, including dishes from the North East and re-inventing old favourites.

**P INDIA HAS BEEN A DARK SPOT FOR KOCHHAR. HE IS NOW CONVINCED FOR A RESTAURANT TO WORK IN INDIA THERE MUST BE ON-THE-SPOT SUPERVISION**

India has been something of a dark spot for Kochhar. He opened two restaurants in Mumbai — NRI and Lima — neither of which did well and eventually closed down. He is now convinced that for a restaurant to work in India there must be on-the-spot supervision.

Saga sees him collaborating with Vishal Anand, who also has franchises for two of Zorawar Kalra's brands and understands the NCR market. Kochhar is enthusiastic about Tanvi Goswami, the head chef, and is optimistic about Saga having learnt from past mistakes.

I was not the greatest fan of Kochhar's food in the Tamarind/Benares period but was hugely impressed by Kanishka and the new direction his food has taken. I haven't been to Saga but I had some of the food delivered at home (admittedly not the best way to judge this kind of complicated food) and thought there was real flair in the kitchen: simple dishes like a tawa mutton pulao and a Parsi-style Salli Boti were executed with flair.

The cuisine is different from Kanishka and marks yet another direction for Kochhar. My guess is that the restaurant will do well. And Kochhar will finally have the Indian success he deserves.



**KEEP COMPANY**  
Vishal Anand, a seasoned restaurateur has collaborated with Atul Kochhar on his latest venture



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