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Regional Tastemaker of the World

Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar is back in India to tell stories with flavours

By SHILPI MADAN

Atul Kochhar is back with a bang on home turf. The London-based, twice-Michelin-starred culinary innovator has been serving gourmet fare over a decade at his prized cluster of tony eateries. Now he has Saga, set up in partnership with Delhi restaurateur Vishal Anand, to woo gourmets and gourmands alike.

Over the years, Kochhar has come to be known as one of the high priests of progressive, edgy Indian cuisine with a signature touch. From quaintly poised puri aloo tacos to his singular dalim shakarkandhi (sweet potato with ruby pomegranate and yoghurt swirls), and a delicately spiced curry leaf martini (a perennial favourite on the Benaras menu) he is the story teller of food. Kochhar said farewell to Mumbai, following the debacle of both his restaurants N.R.I. (Not Really Indian) and Lima. "I love Mumbai, but I made a wrong business decision," he confesses. "Failures often teach and strengthen us. In retrospect, I feel we overlooked the basic mantra — location — when we established the two restaurants. I believe that now we have hit the right spot with Saga," he hopes. The restaurant spreads across two levels of swanky expanse on the Golf Course Road in Gurugram — a 175-seater dining experience with outdoor space.

With Saga, Kochhar seems to have perfected his philosophy of 'getting the notes right with the right music, service and ambience.' The bar is almost 40 feet tall, perhaps making the highball a literal experience. The menus are leatherbound. The staff uniforms are by Raghavendra Rathore. The USP of Saga? Tales. There are dedicated storytellers titled SAGA tellers who act as guides to engage diners



(Clockwise from above) Atul Kochhar plating Lake District New Season Roasted Lamb Rump with Turnip and Paya-Nihari Gravy; Sabz Kathi Korma; Trio of tadka daal, mangodi, and baigan bharta



with the backstory of every dish and cocktail. But Kochhar's favourite pick on the menu is khichri. "I have fond memories of eating different types of the mash while growing up. Bihari food is very close to my heart and I have always flaunted its flavours in my menus across the world. Ayam tikka and goat curry are my all-time favourites." What's making Atul tick at



the moment? "Beetroot has been my love for the last few years. It is my new superfood and its varieties keep my imagination going."

Choosing and reinventing regional specials are his forte, and season determined his choice of dishes to make. The tri-section menu comprises reimagined recipes from different regions that have gone global; for example, the

Ayam Tikka at Saga has hints of 'Malay' garam masala and the South East Asian touches of lime and ginger. From Chettinad to Andhra, from Assam to Rajasthan, Kochhar's repertoire is an union of pan-Indian flavours. "I want to evolve taking into account the variations and history of recipes," he says.

He is preparing to hit the road this summer as part of The Alfresco Theatre Drive-In with a clutch of prized chefs. "Drive ins in the UK is about alfresco music and food. We were locked up in our houses during successive lockdowns. A few of us got together and had the idea of allowing people to enjoy our food outdoors in drive-in cinemas and at music gigs," he recalls. The superchef feels that the lockdown gave more time to think and plan new gastronomic moves. "I got time to spend with my teenage children, Amisha and Arjun. It was their idea to cook in our home kitchen special meals for people

celebrating special occasions. We raised money for The Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children. We have several projects on the go, and only time will tell how many can be pulled off," he smiles. His next restaurant, Mathura, is being readied for launch in a former Westminster fire station in London. A new cook book is on the cards, too. Chefs have busy hands.