

## The foodies troop into India



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**While stereotypes, and Delhi Belly, still abound, India is emerging as a destination for culinary tourists, thanks to a new wave of innovative chefs, regional restaurants and savvy food professionals**

India is tough to package. Especially when it comes to food. Break it down State-wise for a broad introduction. Delve into regions within the State, different communities that inhabit these regions and interpretations of local dishes that change every 100 kilometres; and you have a complex, dynamic menu that makes the thrill of discovery, for even the most non-experimental diner, intense.

It's an ideal setting for food tourism, a genre that is burgeoning as people travel the world inspired by culinary shows, world's top-restaurant lists, influencers and Instagram. It helps that India's culinary ambassadors, like Gaggan Anand, Manish Mehrotra and Vikas Khanna, are packaging regional flavours innovatively, resulting in Indian food breaking free from the greasy butter chicken and fiery *roghan josh* stereotype. Kolkata-born and Bangkok-based chef Gaggan's restaurant ranked number five on the recently announced 'World's 50 Best Restaurants' list in Bilbao, Spain.

And while India has always been a fixture on the route of writers and travel show hosts, over the past few years, celebrities like Gordon Ramsay, Gary Mehigan, David

Rocco, Andrew Zimmern and, of course, the late Anthony Bourdain, began to explore, and celebrate, different facets of the rapidly-changing country, instead of simply hunting for colourful histories and trademark exotica.

On foot

Kaveri Sinhji, Cultural Anthropologist and Historian, Founder, Culture Rings, based in Bengaluru, has been conducting food walks for international tourists for almost a decade now. She says, “About 90% of the people writing in for a booking say that they do not want spicy — spicy meaning chilli hot here. They love our cooking with spices though. They love cinnamon and cardamom and appreciate the various benefits that come from these spices, but chilli hot is not something they want.” She adds that international visitors are extremely worried about things like the Delhi Belly, and some even ask for guarantees on not falling sick. “So I tell them that I can’t give them a guarantee — just like they cannot give me one for their country. If you go to Bangkok, you eat on the street, you are not used to the water — and it is the water that can make you sick.”

“Most Indian diplomats will tell you that there are some brilliant Indian restaurants abroad,” says Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, India’s former High Commissioner to the UK, “However, there are also several Pakistani and Bangladeshi-owned Indian restaurants, and it is these that define Indian food for thousands of international diners. The onus then should ideally be to promote the right concept of Indian food.”



Image makeover

These perceptions are changing, thanks to restaurants like Gymkhana in London (modelled after Indian gymkhana clubs), which got a Michelin in 2014. Or The Cinnamon Club, set in the former Westminster Library, and serving modern Indian food.

Of course, given the build-up, once tourists land in India, they first want to hit the streets for those promised *samosas*. Street food tends to raise questions on quality, hygiene and provenance of ingredients. Aiming to change that is Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), which has undertaken numerous projects towards ensuring food safety across sectors. Project Clean Street Food, launched in 2016, aims to train 20,000 roadside vendors in Delhi on health and hygiene, in phase one. Pawan Agarwal, CEO, FSSAI, says, “In consideration is also a campaign on recognising responsible places to eat at. This will be for restaurants as well as packaged food. Metrics to evaluate quality of produce used, hygiene, reduced food wastage etc, are being developed, and those displaying sincere efforts will be recognised, making it easier for visitors to make smart choices.”

As a food tour organiser, Sinhji believes that clear communication is also important. She emphasises to her clients that if you are not sensible, you can get sick. This is why her tours include home-dining experiences. The way India packages food is as important, says AD Singh, Managing Director, Olive Bar & Kitchen. “Look at the work done by Karen Anand with Dishoom in London,” Singh says. “Indian food in a café format was an eye-opener to a majority of non-Indians who dined there.”

“The marketing of India as a culinary destination lies in the answer of how to brand Indian cuisine,” says Sunil Alagh, Founder, SKA Advisors, and TV commentator. “We should work towards an ideal that reads — Have you tasted food at all if you have not eaten in India?”