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Food entrepreneurs never had it so good before. According to a report by Tracxn, out of 145 food tech companies that operate in this country, 66 were launched last year. Today, perhaps, there are more number of venture capitalists investing in this piping hot industry than in many other sectors.

Most of the new ventures are centred around new, bold and brave ideas, which would have been thought of as being outlier and going against the grain of business sense until a couple of years ago. Some call themselves curated food marketplace and others have become logistics arm for restaurants. Similarly, a good number of foodpreneurs have taken to opening e-restaurants, ventures specialising in delivering new recipes and ingredients, and cooking up customised products.

Market analysts aver that investments in the food space are a natural corollary to the flow of capital in companies whose products or services are used regularly by consumers. A food service business lends itself to frequent use per user, and this could be the main reason for its investor appeal. But despite its inherent attraction for investors, the food service business is a tough nut to crack. While it's true that as a people we love our food and look for opportunities to indulge it, whether at home or in restaurants, the logistics of its preparation, preservance, distribution and delivery are indeed challenging.

Which is why most food service ventures come a cropper within the first few months or years of setting shop. Setting up a restaurant is easier than to turn it around. The new players, many of whom are basking in the glory of their newly launched ventures, should not get carried away by their initial success. They will need to put their nose to the grindstone, keep innovating, maintain consistency of quality and service, in order to firmly find their feet, scale up operations, and thrive. Only then will the new ventures succeed in raising the bar for the industry and its consumers.

Amitabh Taneja

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# Catering with a creative touch

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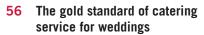




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here can't be a better market with more favourable demographics to create something cool or out of the box. India, being a young nation with 1/5th of its population in the youth category, is an apt market for experimenting with and testing new products and services. This is because, in general, acceptance levels are growing among Indian consumers as a result of global exposure.

There was a time when experimentation or trying new things with food was mostly the preserve of international cuisines, which enjoyed an aspirational value and a certain level of excitement to try out something new. It was something you had only seen and heard of, or had tried abroad. Though the excitement for global dishes still continues, Indian cuisine, especially regional cuisine, has started to grab eyeballs and has grown to be one of the biggest food trends of 2015.

One question that comes to my mind is why suddenly Indian cuisine is getting all the attention?

While we have seen the arrival of foreign restaurant chains, brands and cuisines, 2014 and 2015 has exposed how home-grown restaurants can break into the big league by offering a variety of regional dishes, hence proving why Indian cuisine is still the hot favourite among foodies.

I believe it is the need of the hour to re-create Indian cuisine as it is the most consumed and preferred cuisine in India. It is the one cuisine that an Indian consumer gets over-exposed to since childhood. At a certain level you might feel that there is no thrill about Indian food. But let me correct this fallacy – it's not Indian food that is boring but the specific regional cuisine. This brings up another interesting fact. Until the last decade, Indian food was majorly restricted to north frontier cuisine. New emerging trends in Indian cuisine are breaking that perception and making Indian food more exciting. Another way of looking





at it is that there are more players trying Indian food in the organised sector. However, the majority of food service players is in the unorganised sector, which is full of eateries serving all kinds of Indian food.

I think that in the coming years, the trend of eating out will become stronger and continue to grow in harmony with various traditional Indian cusines, juxtaposed with modern techniques.

Restaurateurs and chefs have taken different paths toward giving Indian cuisine a 'cool' tag. The general trend for Indian restaurants is to focus on product-based experiments. But while this continues to be the priority area, till date there has been no additional perks for customers. These approaches toward making Indian cuisine cool are based on food and aesthetics/interiors.

When we talk about Indian food, the approach is based on techniques and can be divided into two sets.

# Progressive or modern and traditional

What makes progressive Indian cuisine cool is the re-invention of dishes with traditional flavours and presenting them in a totally new avatar. Also, the application of molecular gastronomy makes it gimmicky, which adds a great value to the whole dining experience. The question that remains unanswered is where does it stand in comparison





Amandeep Singh Director, Lemon Seeds Hospitality Pvt Ltd

to the original dish? Let me try answering that. It is a safe gamble as the target audience which loves to try such changes is not quite well-versed with traditional/authentic flavours. So, their acumen to evaluate a dish and the flavours is not high. The progressive Indian works great and wins its cool tag as all dishes are artistically crafted; and it has become an eyecatchy content – thanks to social media.

The second set of restaurants follow traditional Indian food with no frills whatsoever. The cool tag for such concepts can be created with extraordinary plating and styling. According to the research, nearly 50 per cent of the consumers learn about food via social media. Indian cuisine looks more appealing to the youth when mediums like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram promote them on their platform. So, keeping in mind the current scenario, it becomes very important for restaurateurs to offer enough content for social media platforms.

### Impact of ambience

Apart from the quality of food, an aesthetically done ambience plays a vital role for a pleasant and memorable restaurant experience. The furnishings, lighting, music, props, spacing, fragrance, paintings, décor, colours - whatever you choose should make a customer comfortable in his surroundings. He will decide if he has to stay back for the food or not only if the atmosphere gives him a 'feel-good' factor. More than the food, today's generation is hungry for social networking posts and they try to find an opportunity to click their pictures with a good backdrop. It has been noticed that restaurants with the concept of modern Indian cuisine have a western-inspired décor whereas restaurants with traditional or authentic Indian cuisine prefer Asian ethnic interiors, which gives a 'desi' feel. While trying to create something cool, one has to keep one thing in mind: that cool is a time-bound term used for something which is cool today and might not be considered cool after some years.

The underlying metaphor and phenomenon for creating cool is "defying the obvious" by clearly defining your limits. Avoid the temptation of getting carried away by creativity, and keep the diners' comfort as your first priority. ••

Till the last decade Indian food was majorly restricted to north frontier cuisine. New emerging trends in Indian cuisine are breaking that perception and making Indian food more exciting









# Catering with a creative touch

he catering segment in India is mainly dominated by unorganised players, many of whom run their business from the comfort of their homes and small establishments. But in recent years, the scenario has been changing. Compared to the other countries, the Indian catering market is still less organised, say about 18-20 per cent only. But the change in the mindset of the people and emergence of more contemporary choices are redefining the contours of the catering industry.

The market is slowly becoming more organised and caterers more professional. A lot of organised operators comprising international catering companies and big restaurant chains have also started taking catering seriously. Now, catering is no more limited to weddings and birthday parties but encompass a wide array of events. As catering plays an important role in the success of any social event, be it corporate dos, birthdays or wedding celebrations, customers' expectations have risen steadily. Everyone wants to make their occasion a better one than what they have attended so far. Ensuring that catering services meet this

expectation of the customers is therefore of primary importance for any caterer. Service providers understand that the better they will serve, the more potential clients they will get. Virender Handa, Director, Creative Culinary Inc., says, "Our aim is to take every outdoor party and wedding as a project. With the amount of money involved, we try to serve in the best possible manner. If I can do one event a day, I am satisfied. I would aim to give satisfaction to at least 90-95 per cent people I am catering to. Only then, the standard of my business will be sustainable."

As Indians love food and take it very seriously, food is the most important thing that makes any show a success, and good food is always appreciated. Over time, people have become more concerned about what all should be served and be part of the platter at social events. With people exposed to a variety of cuisines, which are now readily available, they want to try out different possibilities. People are becoming more aware about different flavours and cuisines and they want to present the best to their guests. Cuisines like Mexican, Italian, Mughlai are a hit at wedding











The catering industry in India is going through both a period of transition and transformation. Whether it is organising and providing for parties, events, weddings or corporate dos, catering today is about accommodating customers' needs for a wholesome, entertaining experience around food and about offering a catering-cum-event management service

parties and other events. So are the different kinds of exotic desserts as are the various flavours of cheesecakes, soufflés, and cupcakes, all of which are now a standard fare at most of the well-heeled events. Similarly, finger food mini bites are also becoming quite a rage.

On the other hand, it is also true that a customised menu regime is taking the front seat. Client meetings are carried out many times to arrive at a final menu for any event after a food tasting session and after getting feedback from clients. According to Handa, till last year, the trend was towards very big menus, ranging from 100-150 dishes. "But now things are changing and people are limiting the platter to specific cuisines and specialty dishes. Also, spa cuisine (keeping in mind the health with gluten-free food), coastal cuisine(s) are becoming quite popular," he says.

Another notable development is in the choice of the catering venue. Five-star hotels were once the most preferred catering service options in the past. But over time, customers have begun to realise the potential of hosting the events outdoors. "Today, outdoor catering as a trend is catching on. People prefer to outsource their catering needs when hosting both small and large events in an open area like a farm house or lawn. The open air venue allows the aroma of the food to spread around. This has opened up exciting new possibilities for the kind of activities offered at such events," says Ramesh Dang, Director, Seven Seas Hospitality. In fact, catering companies are also acting as consultants, offering their expertise in organising big shows such as destination weddings. "The catering industry's role is enlarging day-by-day with new trends coming to the fore," says Handa.

Like any other business, catering too has its fair share of problems and challenges. Organisations and consumers have become more conscious about what they serve and what is consumed. "So the basic challenge today is to meet the changing trends in food consumption and eating habits,' says Dang. Also, there is a lack of awareness amongst the youth to choose catering as a career option. As a result, finding trained and skilled people who can deliver superior services to customers is difficult. "To keep pace with the changing trends it is important to have people who have a thorough knowledge of spices and flavours, but it is not easy finding the talent of your choice. On the other hand, a huge production base, increase in organised food retailing, growing export opportunities, and a favourable regulatory environment are all leading to the growth of the sector," adds Dang.

But challenges will remain for the catering industry with stricter norms on food standards and an uneven playing field for catering entrepreneurs in the country. That said, catering companies are far more organised in today's scenario to address the concerns of hygiene, quality food preparation and more importantly, fine dining service of top quality that matches the cuisine of the finest restaurants and hotels. Overall, the industry is shaping out well, finding innovative solutions to address the challenges along the way. With the industry growing in size and with so many segments to cater to, the important thing for catering players is to build on their strengths, score on differentiation and in the process develop the catering market in India.

Food Service India brings you interesting stories from a cross-section of catering companies and players, which throw light on how the different segments of the catering industry are evolving with the market trends and developments, and what are their specific drivers of growth and progress. ••











# Fio Cookhouse's Secret Sauce: Do things differently

Vineet Wadhwa, Owner and CEO, VW Cuisines Pvt. Ltd., who runs a chain of fine dining restaurants – Fio Cookhouse and Bar and Fio Country Kitchen and Bar in New Delhi – has over 35 years of experience in the food service industry. In the course of a long and successful career, Wadhwa spent the first 10 years working with the Taj Group of Hotels, Wimpy International and Indotels, and then running his restaurant business and spending time on several overseas consultancy ventures. A maven of fine modern food, his restaurants are reputed for their exemplary pairing of modern Italian cusine with contemporary Indian food.

In a conversation with Sanjay Kumar, he discusses the nature of the restaurant business, how the industry is notorious for being unforgiving to owners, and shares his tips on how entrepreneurs can make a run at success armed with the right strategy and approach at a time when foodpreneurs are jumping into the industry with both feet

As a seasoned and successful restaurateur, which are the parameters – food, presentation, ambience, etc.,– that you think make a restaurant stand out from the crowd?

Be it food, presentation, ambience—in today's time all three are equally important. I don't think any one thing can be ignored. Having said that, it is also very important to be creative in whatever you do and make an effort to think out-of-the-box. But never forget that you are in the business of selling food. If you want to make a success of your restaurant business, one thing is for sure: don't follow the mundane guidelines. If you do that you'll never be able to make an impact. So

whether you pick up a tiny outlet for a classic Italian restaurant, do it your way. And if you are doing a modern European restaurant, then don't copy a leader. Chefs must be encouraged to make twists in the recipes.

At Fio Cookhouse, Rigotini Pasta has a twist with bitter gourd in a mustard cream sauce. Maybe, only two out of ten people will try this dish in its intial launch, but I can guarantee you that they will come back for a repeat. A twist to presentation complements a dish.

# In the restaurant business, it is important to keep your ears to the ground and act on customers' feedback. How do you do it?

We have a guest comment sheet, which is fairly technical and it is analysed every week by a panel especially set up for this purpose. We get a plenty of customer feedback from guests and we ensure that we get back to every single customer who records his or her comments. Second, we do regular mystery audits, at least, 5-6 times a month, to keep a real time check. This is very important because as an owner you can be biased or unscientifically judgemental.

### How do you carry out mystery audits?

Incognito audits are done by foodies, who can be friends, relatives, associates or food bloggers. Nobody is aware of the identity of those conducting the audit – even our managers don't know of it. Our chefs, managers, COO, controllers are all involved at the analysing table of the mystery audit operation. We also regularly refer to review sites like Zomato for feedback. Also, we are part of the various reservation portals from whom we get regular feedback. This way we ensure that we know what percentage of guests who visit our restaurants have enjoyed their experience or not. This system has been in place right from day one and it has helped us to build a huge database of customer response.

# How have you been using this database for improving services at your restaurant?

We use it all the time to better our offerings but we don't use the data for promoting our restaurants. What we do is to conduct periodic reviews of the database to draw up and add to a very selective list of our guests who, we think, are genuine food connoisseurs. We have a group of about 1,000 such people from among the 80,000 regular guests in our database. We call them Fio Friends and treat them as our privileged guests. We keep sending them regular invites on the special occasions that we celebrate at our restaurants. These are the people who are selected by the owner himself i.e., myself, and there is no second person involved. Of course, the recommendations can come from a general manager or the chefs telling me about how a particular guest was a great foodie and how he seemed to be enjoying his food on the table and could be the right person to be a part of our privileged guest members club. All these privileged members are on my personal contact list and I get to share with them how they feel about the experience at my restaurants. This whole mechanism helps me get informed feedback from people who are well exposed and truly versed in the ways of gastronomy and fine dining. And I get to learn a lot of new things from their feedback.

# With your long and varied experience in the food service business, what do you feel are the constant challenges?

It is difficult to please and convince everybody these days. For instance, the sofas in this restaurant is now an inch lower than it was earlier. As we opened about a year and a half ago, the sofas have sunk a bit. Somebody came up and said that your tables are too high. Actually the tables are not too high, it's the sofas that have sunk a little. Now when you listen to the comments people make, you might also start doubting your own things and begin to

We have a group of about 1,000 Fio Friends. selected from our regular list of guests, friends and associates. We treat them as our privileged guests and we keep sending them regular invites on the special occasions. This database is dealt with very proactively by our team, resulting in a scientific and focused research





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