Step Up to the Plate

Restaurateur Rohit Khattar is all set to put the attention back on old-fashioned dining with the launch of the third Chor Bizarre. Whether it will go on to redefine eating-out fashions remains to be seen.

I

Anooshi Vishal

Just love chat?,” smiles Rohit Khattar, arguably one of India’s most successful restaurateurs, certainly its most elusive. “It is only because I like it so much that I forced Manish (Mehrotra) to keep three different ones on the New York menu,” he adds, gleefully breaking up a crisp palak patta dumbed in yoghurt and saurth, quickly pronouncing that it needs a wee bit more of the tang.

The New York menu he mentions is of course Indian Accent’s, India’s top restaurant brand that Khattar owns and which has been making a splash in the Big Apple ever since an outpost opened earlier this year. For almost a year, the restaurateur had been camping in that city, overseeing the launch. Now that the restaurant has successfully taken off, catapulting “modern” Indian food to further global stardom, Khattar is finally home in Delhi – back to where all began, 25 years ago.

The chart we are digging into is not the gentrified one from Indian Accent’s kitchens. Instead, we are lunching one rainy afternoon at Chor Bizarre, the first restaurant Khattar ever set up a quarter of a century ago. House in Hotel Broadway on the fraying Asha All Road, Delhi, the restaurant is an old-fashioned as Khattar’s company – Old World Hospitality.

Its address is as unfashionable today as it was in 1991, when the restaurant came about, centred on a theme of antiques and junk collected from the various chowkazas, or thieves’ markets, in the country. “I had just come back from the US after doing a course in restaurant management and I had this hotel that my mother had inherited from my nana. But all I wanted was to set up something like TGIF. It was (designer and Padma awardee) Rafeel Seth who suggested the idea of chow bazaar to me because I like to collect things and am known to never throw away any. If you look carefully though, it is a bit like TGIF, isn’t it?” he asks.

Nothing, of course, is more unlike the assembly-line TGIF than this space. The antique furniture, a carved four-poster bed, mismatched chairs and crockery all speak of a unique and complex sense of Indianness. The food, with its accent on Kashmiri wazwan, solid curries, kababs and, yes, chaat, is robust. It is remarkable how Chor Bizarre continues to draw busloads of tourists and other diners even in a completely changed world of Indian food, where carefully plated, contemporarised menus rule. That is it Khattar, this collector of old things, appreciator of traditional chaats, attached to the family-owned Broadway Hotel, who almost single-handedly kick-started the ecosystem and changed the way we eat Indian food in restaurants is an irony that can be lost on no one.

The opening of Indian Accent New Delhi in 2009 was a leap of faith. Modern Indian restaurants had all been unequivocal failures till then. “I opened it only because I was so jealous of all these new fancy Indian restaurants in London and New York. I wanted one too.” Khattar entrusted the tricky project to Manish Mehrotra, a Thai chef till then, because after eating virtually all other
existing modern Indian restaurants, he believed that if the food didn’t compromise on flavours even while experimenting, it would click with a demanding Indian audience too. “One thing I knew, Manish could never cook anything which was not tasty,” he said. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now, as the rest of the restaurant world scrambles to copy Indian Accent’s dishes and often tries to poach its chefs (“I am chuffed to get so many free meals because so many of our former chefs are in restaurants all across,” Khatr¨A¨ september launch. Rashmi, Khatr¨A¨s wife, who looks into restaurant design for all his projects, has been bringing brick-and-mortar elements from her home, which houses much of Khatr¨A¨s private collection. In one corner, all of that piles up: antique clocks, carved pillars, mirrors, posters, samovars et al. Each will have a place and a story to tell.

“It was too good an opportunity to pass. This is the right concept for a heritage place like this,” points out Khatr¨A¨. The Bikaner House outlet will be the third Chor Bizarre after Asaf Ali Road and London. Its menu, chef and price points will remain the same as at the original Delhi outlet. Whether it will go on to redefine eating out fashions in the country remains to be seen.

The Elusive Restaurateur

With 40 different restaurants, all profitable, multiple brands and almost no failures to speak of, Khatr¨A¨ is perhaps India’s most successful restaurateur. Though he refuses to share numbers about the annual turnover for his company – now cleaved into separate verticals, including a luxury restaurant portfolio that includes all Indian Accents and Chor Bizarre London – he acknowledges that restaurant revenues are only a part of a much larger whole. “People forget that we have so much banqueting and conferencing business at (the India Habitat Centre that Old World Hospitality manages). The restaurant business is much less than that, though it is more glamorous,” he says.

On the menu are Khatr¨A¨s expansion plans. He is known to be a conservative businessman, does not believe in debt, has not sought private equity either till now, unlike other big restaurant companies in India, and has taken years to grow his brands, one step at a time. While the caution remains, this year marks a watershed. Khatr¨A¨ is now gearing up for some rapid expansion of his business. In his 25 years as a restaurateur, seven as owner of India’s most high-profile brand, this is only the third time Khatr¨A¨ is taking on record to a publication. In private he is unfailingly courteous. In public, you wouldn’t know he exists. It’s an exceptional stand in a scenario where preening restaurateurs, Page Three and social media launches take up almost all marketing budgets. “The chef is the brand, not restaurateurs,” says Khatr¨A¨.

Notwithstanding this distance, he is intimately involved with his restaurants. The company still functions as a closely held family enterprise, even though its structure is known to be fairly streamlined. Khatr¨A¨ creates new concepts, hands them over to his wife to execute, who hands them over to Khatr¨A¨s old school friend Sandeep Tandon, executive director, Old World Hospitality. Tandon is the overall operations head, running the day-to-day business, leaving Khatr¨A¨ to ideate and focus on brand Indian Accent. At least for now.

Three years ago, industrialist Anand Mahindra, whom Khatr¨A¨ considers his mentor, picked up a minority stake in Indian Accent, asking for him to sit on the board. Khatr¨A¨ remains the majority shareholder, with Mahindra and two other friends holding the rest. Funds for a global rollout are thus “not a problem”. Next year, Khatr¨A¨ says, diners should be able to see another outpost of Indian Accent opening in London. The idea is to open one Indian Accent a year in all the major global cities. “But it takes the team at least 7–8 months at each location, so we will have to go carefully,” he adds.

Does a chef-led luxury brand have the bandwidth for such a rollout? “Fortunately, we do have a good second and third line to place. Manish, of course, needs to go from city to city for long stretches but the next in line are all in place. We have Shantanu (Mehrotra) in Delhi and Vivek (Gana) in New York and both have been with us for a very long time,” he points out.

In fact, it is Khatr¨A¨s ability to hold on to people that may be key to his business. Though Old World is not the best paymaster, it offers ESOP options to top management, one of the few restaurant companies in India to do so. Industry lore also suggests Khatr¨A¨s own personality is responsible for people staying on. “When he said that one of his chefs came on a motorbike, he immediately handed him keys to an SUV,” says a chef at another restaurant who doesn’t want to be named. It is no secret that chef Manish Mehrotra, Indian Accent’s poster boy, continues to be offered positions and business propositions a dime a dozen. He has stayed on nevertheless. Khatr¨A¨, for his part, is so closely involved with his new launches that he takes charge of everything – from scouting locations to tweaking menus, to sometimes even clearing tables. A friend from the industry who visited the New York restaurant early into its opening came back to tell me how he had seen Khatr¨A¨ clearing tables himself. “Can you imagine any other restaurateur doing that?” he exclaimed.

Films on the Platter

For a man who confesses to being shy, it is interesting that Khatr¨A¨s two businesses should be so much about showmanship. Restaurants aside, the next few months will see him focusing on films as well. Last year, Anand Mahindra invested in Khatr¨A¨s Cinestaa Film Company, a boutique studio. The first of the co-productions under this banner, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra’s Miraaya, is scheduled for an October release. The company has a three film tieup with Mehra’s production house, Romp.

Earlier, Khatr¨A¨, as chairman of Mumbai Mantra Media Limited (part of the Mahin- dra Group) was involved in a creative lab with Sundance Institute. One of the outcomes was the screenplay for the critically acclaimed Masaan. “As a child, I remember watching films again and again at Broad- way Cinema (that belonged to his mother’s family) in Srinagar. This is living that dream,” he says.

Leigh’s profile but equally ambitious from a business point of view is the rollout of the mass restaurant brand Tikka Town this year. With eight outlets in the NCR, Pune and Lavasa, the plan is to grow these multi-folds, including through the franchise route in tier 2 and 3 cities. Profitability is at the highest or lowest ends of the market, he believes.

As we sip some kahwa, there are some second thoughts. “Do you really need to write this?” he asks. “I don’t have to be in the papers, after all, I am not seeking funding,” he says only half in jest. We write nevertheless.