

too mezzes, baos and a new taste for "modern Indian", which is just a pale imitation of successful formats; Chennai with its latest craze for democratised sushi, much of which is inevitably overseasoned and served with, as one server best described, "that green chutney"; Bangalore with its wannabe reconstructed chilled samosa in melon wrappers, unabashedly smashing the very idea of a hot and crisp snack.

Subatomic Confusion

The taste of the pudding is in the eating. So we decide to test. It's a full house at the sprawling Molecule Air Bar in Gurgaon's Sector 29 on a Tuesday evening. The bar that opened a few months ago has been the toast of the village as much for its unique concept – inspired by Hitler and World War II, if you please – as for its "molecular" food. We ignore the first (though Nazi-chic hardly seems in good taste) and focus on the latter.

On a terrace made pleasant by mist fans and sylvan views, our courses arrive. Hardened "air bread" canapes with tandoori chicken bits, "Hitler's favourite" Maggi in red and white sauce with tandoori chicken bits, tandoori chicken momos, spiced outside and inside, and "ghee roast" soya keema. "Why is it called ghee roast?" I ask. The server looks bewildered at the mention of Kundapura and Mangaluru from where the ghee roast of our previous acquaintance has hailed. "Er," he says, "because the soya is cooked in ghee."

Just then, the star of the show arrives and all eyes are on it. Molecule's reconstructed, deconstructed tokri chaat is quite a spectacle. The chef himself assembles (or de-assembles?) it in quite a ceremony. We try to follow each step. All that we gather is that this is very cold fruit that we could have got from a malfunctioning refrigerator, lashed alternately by frozen yoghurt, chaat masala "gel" (which is decidedly watery), chutneys, spongy, dried dhokla and what the Punjabi palate would define as squeezed-out bhalla. There's a lot of smoke though and some liquid nitrogen but this cryogenised sleight of hand leaves us bewildered. The chaat tastes exactly as it would if we had mixed cold fruits, yoghurt and bits of unidentified sponge from said refrigerator.



"Technique should not matter. The end result or taste should"

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Chef at Tian, New Delhi



"Diners keep visiting the same concepts, under different names. **Boring is the new exciting**"

Nikhil Merchant,
Blogger



There is the cryogenised sleight of hand of molecular gastronomy that doesn't care about taste. Restaurant tables are also groaning under me-too baos and tacos

Molecule, however, has its takers. "Must must go (to) place. I would love to visit them again (sic)," says a reviewer on Zomato, giving it a 5/5 rating. "I have never been a fan of chemistry with it being my least favourite subject but hey, chemistry in food... I could learn about this for days! It's really intriguing to see how variations in food are coming up to keep the customer delighted with little hints of dry ice or the use of liquid nitrogen, you can transform simple dishes to intriguing ones (sic)," says another, eruditely.

The world over, "anti-intellectualism" is a pop culture trend, particularly in the age of social media. Infantilised clothes, movies, books, language and lifestyles are perhaps here to stay. So if diners prefer style over substance, smoke over texture and dig into platters they would have otherwise binned at the neighbourhood chaat-wallah's, who are we to complain? Also, if tastes are dumbing-down, why should restaurants that are profit-driven establishments not cater to them? Finally, who is responsible for this "creeping debase-

ment" – the diner or the restaurant?

Blogger Nikhil Merchant, who blogs at Nonchalant Gourmand and alternates between Mumbai and Los Angeles, traces the dumbing-down to "mediocre fare coming out from establishments focused on theatrics rather than the strength of chefs".

Same but Different

Copy-paste menus and themes are a desperate attempt by restaurateurs to "fit in" and attract the crowd that the successful originals did. "These mediocre places with bastardised offerings ruin palates. Diners keep visiting the same concepts, under different names. It creates a hamster-on-a-wheel effect – you are constantly subject to similar, mediocre fare and you skip along, with your mind tricking you into imagining it to be a different experience! But break it down and you see a thousand versions of the same dimsum, baos, tacos, flatbreads. Same but different. Boring is the new exciting," says Merchant.

His rant is pertinent. Like every artistic expression, the best food too has its imitators. Each time a chef strives to create something unique and cutting-edge and becomes a success, there are scores who want to milk the fetishisation of a new "trend". "Modern Indian" started out like that. Now, almost every new place wants a molecular piece of chaat. Most of these attempts are "just bad copies", as chef Mickey Bhoite, former chef at Le Cirque, Delhi, puts it.

Chef Vikramjit Roy of Tian, one of the most creative chefs in the country and a fair dabbler in mo-



lecular gastronomy himself, explains: "Technique should not matter. The end result or taste should." Detailing, a focus on making everything from scratch, from seasonings to sauces, and a basic understanding of culinary traditions are what distinguish a top-class product from a dumbed-down imitation.

"When a restaurant serves mini podi idlis as café food, why should it serve them with sambar? Podi idlis are meant to be enjoyed for the freshness of idli and homemade podi; each home has a different recipe for it. If you are using microwaved idlis, podi out of a packet and serving these with sambar, it is dumbing-down," says Roy.

Cafeisation of Food

Fast food as a global trend means a simplification of tastes and a change in culinary traditions to suit particular audiences. What, then, is dumbing-down? Where does one draw the line?

The quality of sushi, for instance, depends traditionally on the freshness of top-grade seafood and the quality of vinegared rice. For a purist, American sushi, mayoladen rolls with cooked seafood in tow, would imply dumbing-down. In India, the maki boom comes with further adaptations. Cafes are now dousing even the rolls with shichimi, everyone's go-to Japanese spice. Is it a further dilution? Or, is it merely customising food to suit local palate? After all, didn't our best pop dishes, including the samosa and biryani, come about like this? These are tricky questions that we must ask.

Since food is a sensory experience, the answers can be more instinctive than reasoned. You know instinctively when a dish has been improved upon. Equally, you know when it is just drama and nothing else – like the iced *paan* trending in the capital, in which you taste nothing but melting ice. That would be a dumbing-down of the shaukeen tradition of the betel leaf, where leaves are carefully selected and layered with contrasting tastes to create a complex postprandial digestive.

Chickening Out on Haleem

Indian food traditions have always focused on a complex interplay of flavours. The way we have traditionally used spices – according to seasons, ingredients and a pre-determined order of tipping them in the pan to create a layer of aromatics – is an example. However, the cafeisation of food is changing the way we eat.

At Matia Mahal in Old Delhi, traditions are changing. One of the Ramzan bestsellers this year is the chicken haleem. For purists, it is a shock. Haleem – that slow-cooked dish of meat and grain – gets its flavour from six-seven hours of cooking. Mutton, apart from its taste, is a protein that takes more time to cook than chicken, and is suited to the dish. But chicken is the new pop favourite and even soya versions are creeping up.

Is the larger "Indian" palate then only able to appreciate simpler flavours?

Scores of restaurateurs, mixologists and bartenders, who regularly sell syrupy sweet cocktails to large masses of young consumers, certainly complain so. Things such as artisanal gins, which are seeing a revival globally with scores of botanicals (herbs infused in the spirit to give complex underlying notes), may become niche at best – just as complex, big wines are often prized only for their price tags by the majority.

Amid this pessimism, some restaurateurs and chefs are sticking to quality. Restaurateur Ashish Kapur, the man behind Yo! China, who is now in the upscale-restaurant space, says a difficulty in creating fine food is "poor supply chain of raw ingredients". "The law is unreasonably stringent on imported ingredients and the sheer lack of quality artisanal supply makes fine dining tough to execute". Entrepreneurs are thus turning to café formats, but even here, argues Kapur, "deep-pocket entrepreneurs, effective PR and cheap alcohol can delay the demise of a restaurant that serves poor food. But ultimately it will perish if the basics are not right." ■



The writer looks at restaurant trends, food history and culinary cultures