

weekend WEEK

metro PLUS THE HINDU

Joanna Lobo

Once upon a time, in the 17th Century, the governor of Malabar wrote a botanical treatise. *Hortus Malabaricus* (Garden of Malabar) is a series of 12 tomes that highlights the flora in the Malabar Coast and its medicinal properties; it is considered an important book on India's plant wealth. Today, this treatise finds space in research, studies and other books and lately, in cocktails.

At Kochi's Hortus – The Garden of Malabar, the cocktail programme is a tribute to the botanicals mentioned in the book. "It was fascinating to learn about our rich heritage and how the Malabar region was responsible for many botanicals we use today," says owner Issac Alexander. "There's no bigger story that needs to be told, and what better way to say it than through craft cocktails?"

These days, cocktails come with a garnish of history. The cocktail evolution in India is seeing rapid strides. Once a neglected part of a menu, today it is often a restaurant's shining star. Cocktails are winning awards and propelling their bars to stardom, they are showcasing modern techniques and skills and highlighting lesser-known ingredients.

Often, they tell a story. "In 2024, if you are making drinks without any

thought, you won't pique people's interest," says Arjit Bose, mixologist. "It is always good to have the stories to go with the drinks, so it gives the team some direction, and inspiration," he says, adding, "There has to be a little romance."

A nostalgia trip
The past, expectedly, is ripe for romance. Mixologists and bartenders today are seeking inspiration from different aspects of history – the heritage of a city, of a place, ingredients that have stood the test of time, and even, classic drinks.

Delhi's Fort City Brewing's Takht-e-Dilli menu highlights eight historical city forts, while The Library Bar at the Leela Palace has a cocktail programme that honours old classic novels and books. In Kolkata, brew pub Olterra's In Search of Bengal, looks at unique city flavours like Bandel cheese. At Bandra Born in Mumbai, Chef Gresham Fernandes has sought inspiration from the stories of the suburb to create cocktails named after characters or legends. Patricia's Pussycats, for example, is a vodka-orgeat-aperol cocktail inspired by the story of a foreigner named Patricia living in Bandra who would take two tiger cubs she had as pets, on walks down Carter Road.

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Bartenders are turning to the past to seek inspiration for the present with period-inspired cocktail menus

History in the mixing

A cocktail at Slink & Bardot.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



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After Gigaton: Pearl Jam unveils *Dark Matter*, its 12th studio album, set for release on April 19. The first single is out, heralding a world tour starting May 4 in Vancouver. Singer Eddie Vedder, lead guitarist Mike McCready, and bassist Jeff Ament shared the news and played tracks at West Hollywood's Troubadour club.



Talkingpoint

Notre Dame rebirth: The scaffolding concealing Notre Dame Cathedral since the 2019 fire was dismantled last week unveiling its new spire adorned with a golden rooster and cross. Paris residents await its reopening on December 8, though it will remain closed during the Summer Olympics.

pick of the week

Concerts, workshops, tours, and everything else you need to plan your social calendar.

For events, contact us on weekend@thehindu.co.in



Elegant essentials
Sport elegance on your wrist with the black and gold Manero Peripheral by **Carl F. Bucherer**, with CFB A2000 calibre. Explore modern luxury at Ethos Watch Boutiques starting ₹8,36,200. Another timepiece to add to your wardrobe is from **Daniel Wellington**'s Bound Collection. Shop for the rectangular and curved case on in.danielwellington.com starting ₹19,000.

Art fling

Learn to paint like a pro with a workshop on **Kerala mural painting**, led by artist Nandana. Dive into the rich heritage of Kerala's artistry on February 21 at Triple O Studio, Adyar. Call 7845946906 to register. For another fun painting workshop, check out **Tanjore paintings** workshop at SA Games village, Koyambedu from February 19 to March 3. Call 9381157831 to register.

Laugh riot

Laugh along with **Samay Raina** at his special Unfiltered. Be a part of the last leg of his India tour at Raja Annamalai Mandram on February 24, 7pm. Tickets on in.bookmyshow.com at ₹499. Comics **Guna Kannan**, and **Sundaresh Ravindran** will perform an interactive comedy show for cinema lovers at Offbeat Music Ventures tomorrow at 5pm. Tickets on in.bookmyshow.com starting ₹299.

Timeless fashion

Step into the Amethyst Room's pop-up with **AISH**, showcasing its collection of dresses, skirts, shirts, co-ords and more. Discover timeless pieces crafted from premium fabrics until February 23, 10.30am to 7.30pm. Into metallic tones? Check out **Alan by Vani**'s Unconditional collection. Shop gowns, skirts, dresses and co-ords that exude timeless elegance starting ₹5,999 on alanbyvani.com.

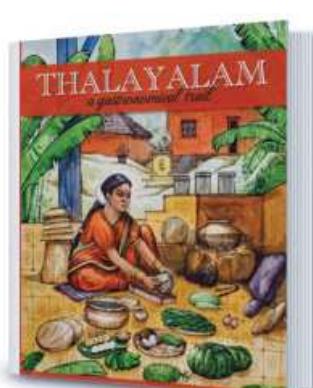
Eclectic beats

Embark on a melodic journey with **Darshan Raval**, as he embarks on his India tour. For an evening filled with love and rhythm, wear something blue and head to YMCA Ground, Nandanam on March 3 at 5pm. For a genre shift, indulge in some music with **DJ Spacejams** from Mumbai, and Chennai's DJ Nich at Black Orchid, RA Puram on February 23 at 8pm. Tickets on sortmyscene.com at ₹349.

Flavour fiesta

Celebrate the month of love at SOCIAL outlets all over the country! The **#LoveAll** campaign included a special seven stages of love menu, until February 20. To indulge in a delectable meal, head to Sheraton Grand Chennai Resort & Spa for the **Marwari Food Festival** from February 23 to March 3. Try dishes like *dal baati churma* and more at ₹2,749. For reservations, call 93848 32956.

Explore **Crafts Bazaar**, the exhibition cum sale at Sri Sankara Hall in Chennai on until February 20 at TTK Road, Alwarpet and shop a vibrant showcase of ethnic and contemporary arts, crafts, textiles, and jewellery from skilled artisans. For more art, head to **India Design week '24** at NSIC Exhibition Ground, Delhi until tomorrow. Head to Exhibit 320, a showcase of contemporary art from India.



Nidhi Adlakha
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Seven years ago, Samrata Salwan Diwan started working on a passion project: putting together her maternal family's history in a book for her maternal grandmother. "Growing up, my grandparents would recount captivating tales about their lives, spanning their childhood, the ancestral home, friends, cousins, and the challenges of forced migration during the Partition. My paternal great-grandfather and the family, compelled by the events of the Partition, had to leave Peshawar and move to Delhi as refugees," she says, adding how the project led her to create similar projects for others.

A year later, New-Delhi based Samrata launched Family Fables Co., a publishing company that helps individuals, families and institutions document everything from family histories to recipes. "It's disheartening that many of these stories are gradually fading with time. We often underestimate the value of our experiences and, on a broader scale, our family histories. While there is an inherent curiosity about our roots, we sometimes find ourselves unsure of which questions to ask," adds Samrata who holds a postgraduate degree in International



The time traveller's guide

A memoir, cookbook, a biography... here is how Samrata Diwan documents personal stories

(Left) Maral Yazarloo Pattrick with her book, *Bump on the Road*, that captured her ride which spanned 18 months, covered seven continents, 64 countries, and 1,10,000 kilometres; (below) Samrata Salwan Diwan. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Relations from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Till date, Family Fables Co. – featuring a team of writers, editors and designers – has published over 40 books comprising family history books, memoirs, biographies, cookbooks and institutional histories.

Story to book

For those keen on documenting their personal projects, Samrata, 39,

says the process begins with the team considering which members would be the most genuinely excited about the project. "Secondly, we evaluate the requirements of each project. While we offer end-to-end service, some projects come to us at different stages. Some may need more research; others may need a focus on refining the narrative," she explains, adding how their most recent food memoir project, *Thalayalam*, was penned entirely by



It's disheartening that many of these stories are gradually fading with time. We often underestimate the value of our experiences and, on a broader scale, our family histories

SAMRATA SALWAN DIWAN

hand during the pandemic years by the author, Vasantha Ranganath.

Samrata says a family history book takes approximately eight-12 months to complete and publish. "We manage the entire process, encompassing content collection, writing, design, and printing. The decision on the number of copies is left to the family's discretion," she says, adding that projects are priced depending on the scope of work and can go up to a few lakhs.

Heirlooms and family trees

Samrata says most projects are heritage stories, with 'family' occupying a prominent theme. "Family history is an incredibly diverse subject, encompassing oral accounts of previous generations, ancestry, recipes, remedies, photographs, and the construction of a family tree."

Reminiscing about her childhood tradition of spending every Saturday at her maternal grandmother's house, Samrata says it was all about hearing stories. "Her (grandmother) father, PN Deogun, saved Mahatma Gandhi from being crushed against a wall by a crowd... it was Lala Lajpat Rai who gave him the important life lesson to complete his education, which he did and went on to join the Indian Forest Service. He retired as the Chief Conservator of Forests. Nani would regale us with stories of growing up in the jungles of Chamba."

And it is these stories that Samrata says she wanted to preserve. "Every family has something worthwhile to share. It's not necessary to be famous or to have achieved a certain level of success in life to feel the importance of documenting one's story," she concludes.

For details, log on to familyfablescompany.com



(Left) Tyler Lyle and Tim McEwan of American synthwave duo The Midnight; the first edition of Bloomverse featured Anuv Jain. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Catering to niche

Boutique music festivals usually keep to a specific genre and are well suited for that particular musical style. "Each of our festivals is designed to cater to specific subcultures. Bloomverse is our flagship intellectual property for the North East India market and celebrating local talent has been at its core. We wanted this festival to cater to a niche audience and so, the bands and artists who will be playing at the event are niche too," says Anmol.

Bazaar, a pop-up event curated by Rudy Marak, which focusses on women-led small-scale ventures. "The platform is dedicated to building and

sustaining a community of artisans, assisting upcoming entrepreneurs in providing an environment for entrepreneurial exchange. Attendees can expect handcrafted products such as macramé home decor by Craft Star by Chetry, crochet and resin work by Homespun, paintings, candles, and soaps by Oeuvre and You and many more. We also have a Polaroid photobooth," says Rudy.

Meghalaya is gearing up to host the Bloomverse Music Festival in Umiam Water Sports Complex, Umiam, on February 24, 4pm onwards. Tickets start at ₹2,499 on skillboxes.com.

A sneak peak into the country's biggest events and festivals before they happen. So, you want to travel more? Watch this space.

PLAN AHEAD

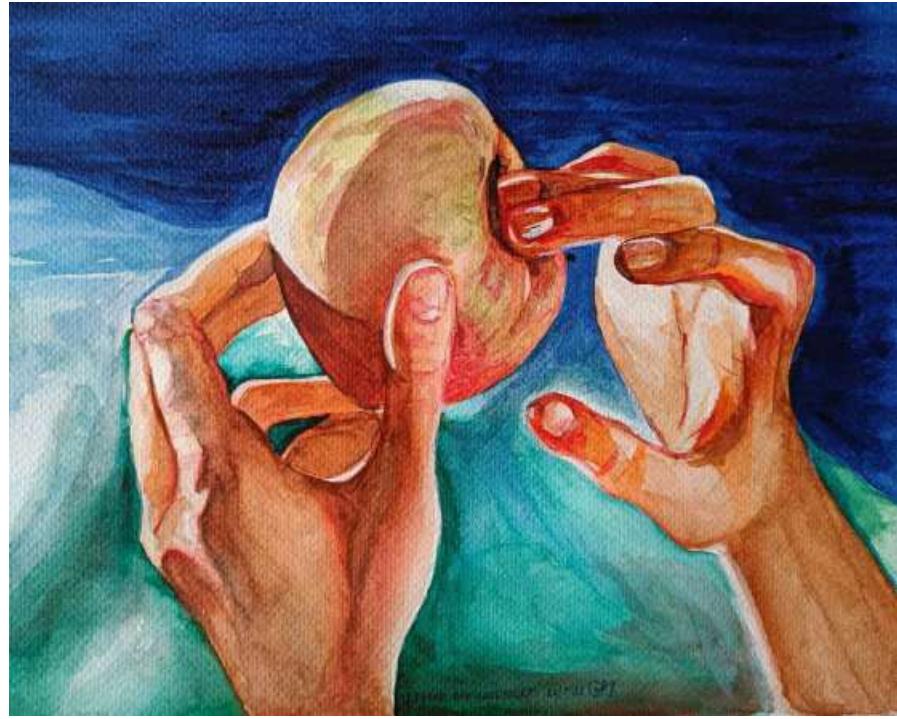
IN SYNTH WITH THE BLOOM

Yellow Diary, while the live stage was headlined by Lifafa and Blot!. This year, we have one stage," he adds. This edition's lineup focusses on local talent, but also caters to the growing demand for international music, he shares.

Mic check
A total of five artistes will be taking the stage at the festival, including alternative/ambient rock band Polar Lights from

Nagaland's Dimapur and Nokpante, a multi-genre band from Tura, Meghalaya. "Polar Lights' recent album received over half a million listens in just seven months," Anmol states. The festival will also feature a performance by hip hop and R&B artiste Meba Ofilia.

Side hustle
The festival will also have stalls and craft corners at The Mini



Catch poetry and book readings, live caricatures and paintings, at the fourth edition of the Art Bengaluru Collective



(Top) Art by Mohana Roy at ABC 4.0; (left) art by Asha Krishnan at ABC 4.0. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

For a lot of people, the art world comes across as intimidating and high brow, a notion that the Art Bengaluru Collective (ABC) is attempting to debunk.

"When we began in 2022, our idea was to democratise art. Artists and galleries tend to be exclusive, operating under specific terms and conditions; at ABC we

don't charge any commission for artworks sold," says Rasheed Kappan, a journalist and cartoonist in Bengaluru, who founded ABC with

actor-painter Ranji David. "The collective takes gallery space and divides it among artists. With this approach, the artists enjoy a gallery setting to

exhibit their work," he adds. In keeping with the format of their first three shows "of art, artistry, accessibility and affordability", this latest 4.0 version of the event will showcase creativity in myriad forms.

Spread across three galleries at the Rangoli Metro Art Centre – Vismaya, Chaya and Belaku – visitors will be treated to as many as 250 works of art created by over 25 artists.

"We also try to curate events within that space to facilitate interactions between the artists and their audience. The ecosystem will be different with poetry readings, book readings, live caricatures and paintings, and other proceedings unfolding simultaneously. We

wanted to make it like a live space, not just a static display," says Rasheed.

"As part of creative interaction, artists and their audiences can engage in art appreciation. We, the curators, will also be present, introducing each artist and their work to the gathering, before moving on to the next," he adds.

Some of the artists whose work will be featured include Asha Krishankutty, Salmin Sheriff, Alok Algoankar, Gargi Verma, Lt Col Ramesh Ramaiah, Veena Priyaranjan and Padmavathi Rao.

ABC 4.0 by the Art Bengaluru Collective is on at Rangoli Metro Art Centre till February 18, 11am and 6pm. Entry is free.



Cultural harmony

Experience Bharatambe, a theatrical journey through India's cultural kaleidoscope. Directed by Ambika Kamleshwar, the inclusive production by RASA features 240 children from special education schools at Narada Gana Sabha on February 21 at 6.15pm. The event is open to all.



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(Clockwise from below) Hussain Shahzad, executive chef at Papa's Hunger Inc. Hospitality; What The Duck with dry aged duck, Indrayani rice and green garlic; thayir sadam with beetroot, chèvre and shiso; chhena poda with comte, caviar; and potato chips with lemon, truffle, and champagne. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



shawarma course is inspired by the shawarma stand beside us..."

Named Bugs Bunny, this course is a good example of how Hussain's style defies categorisation, and is yet a culmination of years of cooking and eating old school menus. "When I create a dish, I want it to be delicious, significant and technique-driven," says the chef adding, "I bring who I am to the plate... I don't have a definition of this cuisine, to be honest. But the soul is rooted in the idea of India."

Bugs Bunny starts with rabbit, of course, influenced by Chennai, where Hussain was born and raised. "I grew up eating rabbit 65 at Anjappar and Ponnusamy. We get sundried weaver ants from Odisha, then make a marinade with crushed pepper, cumin, sumac, a bit of fresh ginger, garlic and chillies." The wild

rabbit, from Nasik, is marinated with the ants, then grilled on charcoal, resulting in a buttery meat, served with garlicky toun.

Discussing Papa's menu, Hussain adds, "There will be dishes that challenge you, dishes that comfort you... Desserts that come as savoury bites that push your perception, but also, a thayir saadam that is familiar..."

A tribute to Chennai, the thayir saadam is made with sushi rice and goat's cheese. It is served with slow-cooked beetroot, which is dehydrated and rehydrated till it is intensely flavoured. Instead of appalam, there is a crunchy shiso leaf. And pickle from the Mylapore Ganapathy store in Chennai. "That's a very deep memory for me... you don't need to fix what's not broken, you just need to reimagine it," says Hussain, adding that they also use Uthukuli ghee from Ganapathy's in the kitchen.

The night begins with cocktails, put together by hipster bartenders dressed in black, with smooth technique and big smiles. Sameer explains how Yash and Pankaj Balachandran, co-founder, Countertop India, worked on making the cocktails "smashable, where you want to have one after the other". Built with just three ingredients each, to allow individual flavours to come through, the menu features a dirty martini, using olive oil instead of brine, for an addictive umami kick.

Dinner comes with a thoughtful beverage pairing by sommelier Madhusudan Kashyap, featuring everything from French champagne and old world reds.

Sameer says, "This is playfully Indian food. While the soul is Indian, it is a culinary adventure that is equal parts comforting, equal parts surprising. It should evoke emotion." Hussain concurs, stating, "You want to walk into an experience, and you want to forget your life for a bit."

Without giving too much away, life certainly pauses when we start on dessert, a compelling blend of freshly fried potato chips, served with a fizzy Champagne zabaglione, laced with honey, butter and truffle sugar. "This dish was our North star," says Hussain, "when you don't have any reference point in cuisine, it helped to have a starting point that is an emotion."



Q&Q
The menu came together with a lot of trial and error. In the last eight years of cooking in Bombay this is the one menu I failed at the most

HUSSAIN SHAHZAD
Chef



Papa's is open from Wednesday to Saturday, and seats 12 diners a night. It is above Veronica's, Ranwar, Bandra West, Mumbai. Call +91 77388 95597. ₹4,950/- for the non-vegetarian tasting menu and ₹4,750/- for the vegetarian (plus taxes).

Come to papa

The 12-seater restaurant in Mumbai features a technique-driven tasting menu by Chef Hussain Shahzad, highlighting regional ingredients for no fuss, fine dining

Shonali Muthalay
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I am not sure at what point dinner turned into a party. Perhaps it was when Chef Hussain Shahzad started sharing negroni shots with diners, poured into delicate sake glasses from his trusty silver hip flask. Perhaps it was when the unexpectedly indulgent 'chhena poda' appeared, topped with a generous, unsteady pile of Kaluga caviar. Or perhaps it was when the room began thudding with Shakira's 'Hips Don't Lie', from the chef's retro-packed playlist.

We are at Hunger Inc's newest launch, Papa's – a space that brings together the charms of a discreet speakeasy, a luxury restaurant and friend's dining table. The intimate 12-seater restaurant is built around the chef's workspace, which is lit theatrically, like a stage. The space, which was kept a secret till opening

day, is above Veronica's, a perpetually packed cafe and sandwich shop, in a building that used to be an iconic neighbourhood bakery called St. Jude's, set in Bandra's quirky Ranwar village.

"Imagine a chef runs a sandwich shop at the bottom, and lives upstairs, in Bandra in the 1980s," chuckles Hussain, his eyes sparkling with delight.

"Now, imagine Wes Anderson designed the space," chimed in Sameer Seth, co-founder at Hunger Inc, along with Yash Bhanage. (The Hunger Inc team, mentored by the late Floyd Cardoz, runs some of Mumbai's most popular restaurants: The Bombay Canteen, O Pedro, Veronica and now, the newly opened Papa's, with Hussain at the helm as executive chef.)

While the food is thoughtful and the 13-course menu is reflective, punctuated with ingredients sourced from across India, Hussain also subverts the rules and makes it fun. A sleek samosa composed of

tuna, chamomile and horseradish for instance. Or clear rasam starring trout and roe, vibrant with watermelon and lime leaves.

Nice and easy does it
Breaking rules successfully takes skill, and the chef – who worked with the award winning 11 Madison Park in New York – does it confidently, presenting dishes with a cheeky casual flair that belies the hard work behind the scenes.

"The menu came together with a lot of trial and error. In the last eight years of cooking in Bombay this is the one menu I failed at the most," says Hussain candidly. "There was a blank canvas that needed to be painted. I could go a million ways... But the biggest thing I wanted to do with fine dining was to bring more flavour to the food. More flavour, without the fuss."

This menu is firmly rooted, not just in India, but also pays tribute to Ranwar village. "It has to have context," says Sameer, "The

(Clockwise from left) A snapshot from Raahi Neo Kitchen and Bar; a drink at Slink & Bardot; Vishal Tawde of PCO; cocktails at Sidecar and Slink & Bardot. ASSAD DADAN



History in the mixing

gin), hemp (jasmine tea and lemongrass from the mountains), pashmina (inspired by Himalayan provenance, they use goji berries and peaches with vodka), and Kanchipuram silk (traditionally woven in temples from pure mulberry silk, the drink is a nod to the halwa served in temples with ghee, cardamom, cashew, and bourbon topped with a bit of gold).

Also in Mumbai, the team at Slink & Bardot have dug into a different history – of the cocktails themselves. The menu, Evolutions of Cocktails, highlights popular drinks from different eras, spanning the 16th Century to the present day.

"We chose to focus on history because there are so many interesting facts about cocktails that few know about. For instance, the famous drink, Punch, originated in India. While some may think cocktails came from the western

world, here we have a cocktail made in India," says head mixologist, Santosh Kukreti. His team has taken classical cocktails and modernised them with new ingredients and techniques.

Besides the Punch (turmeric infused gin), the menu features



Slink Smash (a clarified milk and beer take on the Whisky Smash), Bombay Buck (an almond milk and coconut seltzer take on buck cocktails), and

Jackfruit (a feni drink with kaffir lime, lemongrass and coconut milk).

Slink's new limited edition cocktail (and food) menu is an ode to their Koli neighbourhood and Koliwada community and includes a Jujube Sour (with ber, and parmesan cheese liqueur, pisco), Not Alphonso (mango ginger and whisky) and Coast Guard's Brew (vodka, coffee, and ghee).

The right ingredients

Among the many trends in the cocktail world, the phrase ingredient-forward is bandied about a lot. It is when one ingredient, often a spice or fruit or botanical, is given prominence. Indian ingredients, especially those that have long graced our kitchens are a surefire way to connect the past and present, while also being familiar. As a bonus, it brings attention to some little known ingredients too.

Take herbs like vetiver, jatamansi, and Himalayan fir, for example. Commonly used in Ayurvedic treatments, they are rarely part of kitchens. It is why Bengaluru's Raahi Neo Kitchen and Bar and Mumbai's Ekaa decided to collaborate on a limited edition menu.

"These ingredients aren't usually consumed in food, but highlighting them in cocktails allowed people to understand their taste profile. It worked very well," says Avinash Kapoli, beverage head, Raahi.

In Delhi, Sidecar's cocktail menu 4.0, Arq, is about invoking nostalgia through aromas using ingredients like gondhoraj, kokum, and cilantro. At Noon in Mumbai, Vanika Choudhary uses mahua liberally

in her food and drinks – a Mahua Negroni with gin washed mahua seed oil and mahua leaf & flower; and Mahua Champagne with distilled mahua flower.

AMPM, Kolkata has nolen gur in its Old Fashioned; betel leaves find space in Delhi Fig & Maple's Don't Paint the Town Red; Coorgi kachampuli vinegar in Flower at Copitas in Bengaluru; champa in the drinks at Goa's for the Record-Vinyl Bar; and ragi (specifically ragi malt) in the High on Ragi at Pangeo in Bengaluru.

It is Hortus' innovative cocktail programme (curated by Countertop) that combines history, local ingredients, modern techniques and storytelling.

The ingredients mentioned in the books, like green pepper, lemons, peanuts, berries, cassia leaf, and tamarind, find their way into drinks like Merchant of Muziris, and Nelcynda Sour. Mixologist Karl Fernandes who helped curate the menu says, "The book has become part of the region's culture, so the programme was majorly built around Kochi and ingredients available here."

Karl also worked on the craft bar RÜ in Hyderabad inspired by Deccan's history. On the menu are drinks like a Zaffrani Highball, with aromatic notes with rice water and ginger that are meant to evoke the essence of a zaffrani biryani.

The scene is ripe for the interweaving of history and cocktails, where the knowledge of the past is being used with modern techniques to appeal to new-age drinkers.

These cocktails are taking customers on a journey through time, culture and flavour. Says Vishal, "In the world of cocktails, having a good story is really important. It gives people something interesting to engage with."

The team dipped into stories of the fabrics, their origins, and their evolution. "We sourced ingredients from the regions associated with each fabric and the cocktails were crafted with attention to the textures and colours," says Vishal.

The drinks include tributes to Banarsi (using Banarsi paan with



Explore the odd pairings that surprisingly work at Madam G, Kolkata's swanky new progressive diner

Barry Rodgers

They say you truly appreciate the scent of home after spending some time away. I do not know who first noticed this, but they were definitely onto something. Kolkata is my home. Even though I left the city in 2016 to pursue journalism in Mumbai, I have always felt drawn to it. It is where my family brings me back to reality every time I visit. It is where the food reminds me that I will not find the same taste anywhere else (no offence, Mumbai).

In mid-January, I reacquainted with the city as a visitor. Nothing much has changed apart from a few blue-and-white accents and the mushrooming of the F&B scene. One establishment, in particular, has everyone talking – Madam G, a contemporary dining space by entrepreneur Drishleen Sethi, which specialises in progressive Indian cuisine.

Drishleen started her entrepreneurial career in the F&B space with Rakshay Dhariwal, co-owner of Passcode Hospitality. She went on to launch Ping's Café Orient in the city in 2017 and SAZ – American Brasserie in 2019.

"I've observed the success of establishments offering a variety of Southeast Asian cuisines under one roof. We wanted to bring that concept to Indian food but in a chic way, where people could also enjoy cocktails. While Asian and Italian cuisines have successfully achieved this, Indian cuisine seemed to lack that niche in the city," she says. After brainstorming, the team decided to focus on coastal cuisine because they personally love the flavours.

"We explored various places in Goa, Coorg, New Delhi, and Mumbai – from local eateries to fine-dine restaurants. That's when we

Madam's order



finalised our plan to create a place that emphasises coastal and South Indian flavours while incorporating different tastes from all over India," she says. With Madam G, Drishleen, along with multidisciplinary artist Eesaan Kashyap, who designed the tableware, has integrated the restaurant's narrative into its design. The balanced colour palette, opulent yet understated, sets the backdrop for an extensive menu.

What stood out for me was the inventive bar programme. The Neemcho negroni was a winner with the use of homemade neem liqueur instead of Campari, providing a unique bitterness. The Malabari highball is distinctive with its homemade curry leaf bitters. And then there were the unconventional cocktails, including the Ball at Banaras, a potent drink dedicated to the holy city with an unexpected paan garnish stuffed with gulkand.

Tribute to the Mughals features in-house preserved gondhoraj marmalade on toast for a touch of Bengal freshness. An evening at

Victoria is a combination of gin, celery, and watermelon shrub.

One notable choice for the night was Call me, Madam G – a sour yet refreshing concoction of gin, passion fruit, citrus, vanilla, coconut milk, and amra foam.

"For our bar programme, we brought in a cocktail consultant named Nilesh Kachdiya from Mumbai. The research and development process involved figuring out how to make classic cocktails

unique. It's similar to how a traditional dish, like our tuna khakara, takes a familiar concept but adds a twist. The idea was to keep the drinks familiar, yet surprising and flavourful in a way that sets them apart," says Drishleen.

The bar bites complement the cocktails, with khakaras paired with homemade hummus in flavours like curry leaf, molagapodi (gunpowder), soy keema, and even chorizo. There are surprises like Gujrati khaman, a dhokla-chaat with a twist, and a savoury ghewar with burrata. Additionally, there is a kulcha bar that puts a twist on classic Indian bread, using in-house sourdough bread with a unique assortment of toppings.

What sets Madam G apart is that despite the inventive menu, it does not overwhelm the diner. This is noteworthy, considering that many progressive restaurants in the country tend to go overboard with their offerings.

Madam G is located at 2, Lee Road, Altitude-The Business Park, 2nd Floor, Bhowanipore, Kolkata. A meal for two costs ₹1,800

Rio's spirit guide

Follow the writer's caipirinha-punctuated adventures as he bar hops across Copacabana Palace, Bip Bip and an array of cocktail carts in search of the elusive Rabo de Galo

Vikram Achanta

You can drink high in Rio and you can drink low, and I did both, and in-between too. The promenade along Copacabana, as well as Ipanema and Leblon, has cocktail carts well-spaced out, so by the time you have finished your first expertly mixed caipirinha, you can order your next. The word Copacabana was derived from the Quechua word *copa caguana* meaning luminous palace. If you want to drink high, the Copacabana Palace, a Belmond Hotel and an Art Deco masterpiece, is on the other side of the street.

It is drizzling as I get down from my Uber and wander inside, in search of a cocktail. My options seem to be either Cipriani or Pergula, both ringing the pool. Pergula, which has an al fresco section, gets my vote.

On my arrival in São Paulo, a week ago, a local bar owner recommended that I try a cocktail called the Rabo de Galo, essentially a Brazilian version of the Manhattan, where the bourbon gets swapped with cachaca (Brazilian rum). Since then on, I have been on the hunt but struck out wherever I go, and the Copacabana Palace is no different.

Resignedly, I turn to their regular menu. The opening section is titled Brasilidade. The drink that catches my eye is called Mariola, which uses the local YVY Gin, which I had heard good things about. The other ingredients are banana (banana) syrup, sour, and ginger foam. It is served in an old-fashioned glass with a ginger candy wafer balanced on the rim. The foam is pleasing to the eye and gingery on the nose. The foam also gives the drink a lovely texture, the interplay

of ginger and the sour with banana syrup works well.



(Above) Rabo de Galo at Liz Cocktail Bar; (left) Jambuzada Sour at Explorer Bar; and (below) a caipirinha. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

feeling like a Carioca, a local. Nevertheless, I still use Google, and a quick search leads me to The Explorer, a bar tucked away in the corner of a small hotel on a hill. Happy Hours are on, and I order a creamy Jambuzada Sour, made with Jambuzada, abacaxi (pineapple) and sour mix. Jambuzada is cachaca (Brazilian rum) made from sugarcane spirit infused with the jambu flower. It mildly numbs the mouth, the effect of the jambu flowers from the Amazon.

Intrigued by the taste, I use my Happy Hour allowance to get myself a Jambu Treme next. A Mai Tai in its makeup, it features Jambuzada as a substitute for dark rum.

The next day, I head to Liz Cocktail and Co, which is pretty close to my Airbnb in the leafy and upscale Leblon neighbourhood. The Hollywood-themed menu has a set of cocktail classics. I ask the bartender for something local.

If it is a spirit-forward cocktail you like, he says, I can recommend a Rabo de Galo. And lo and behold, on my last night in Rio, my quest is complete.

The next day takes me back to the bohemian Santa Teresa neighbourhood. Just two days into Rio, and I am



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Diipa Büller Khosla with her mother Sangitha Khosla on The Champi Tour. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Priyadarshini Paitandy
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Diipa Büller Khosla is busy deciding where to lunch. She loves a good South Indian meal. And, filter coffee. Savya Rasa, Manjal, Junior Kuppanna... she lists out her options. The Mumbai/Amsterdam-based influencer – with an Instagram following of 2.1 million – has strong ties with Chennai. Her mother grew up here. Diipa lived here for a year and studied in Udhagamandalam (Ooty). She was back in the city this

week to host an event for her brand Inde Wild - The Champi Tour - Momi x Diipa Khosla. "This feels like homecoming," she says.

Diipa launched Inde Wild, her skincare and beauty line in 2021. That is the year she delivered not one, but two pandemic babies. Her daughter Dua in April and Inde Wild in October. "I was on call (for the brand) three days after giving birth to Dua. I was mulling over this launch for many years. Trying to create a business in a world that had shut down had its challenges," she says.

"If you look at the beauty world, there are Ayurveda brands and

Diipa Büller Khosla, the popular digital content creator, is on The Champi Tour with her mother, promoting the tradition of hair oil, along with her beauty products

fashion

Wilde child



Starter kit

Diipa Büller Khosla's advice for digital content creators.

- Have a long-term vision.
- There is bullying and trolling and if you are not thick-skinned, it can get you down.
- In the world of trends and algorithm, everything changes quickly. Know what you truly stand for.
- Stay consistent to stay relevant.

dermatologist-led brands. We wanted to marry both; make a modern version for the youth in India," says Diipa. The first product the brand created was an AM PM serum. Before a new product is formulated, she asks her community of Inde Wild users what they would like next. That is how the SPF lip balm came about.

The hair oil is one of their bestsellers globally and was the main character at the Chennai event. The oil is made using her mother's formula. *Champi* (head massage) with this oil was a constant in her childhood. It would be a shame not to launch this hair oil, says Diipa.

Though Khosla senior was against the idea in the beginning, she eventually gave in and shared the ingredients and recipe. The manufacturing happens in different parts of the world. For example, the *champi* oil is made in Gurgaon, the SPF lip balm is made in Seoul.

The 33-year-old entrepreneur is also one of the first Indian digital creators. During an internship at a social media agency in 2012 in Amsterdam, she noticed a

lot of Caucasian women making it big on social media. "I wanted to be this influencer person; though this term hadn't come about then. I wondered why isn't an Indian woman doing it? Why should we not have representation? So, I started in 2014," she recalls.

One of the first things that went viral was when she showed her acne skin live. It started a dialogue about real women and skin and body positivity. Because till then people were largely using filters for their face.

"My wedding post went viral. We hit 200 million impressions in a week. There was a moment when my husband (Oleg Büller) touched my feet and we spoke about mutual respect." Then there were moments from her attendance at Cannes film festival that received a lot of views, especially a picture of her in a yellow gown with two breast pumps, just after her daughter's birth.

Her talks at Harvard, House of Commons, United Kingdom, Davos, TED Talks, all largely highlight topics such as minority women leaders, doing business globally, how to fundraise etc. Topics that resonate with her community include fashion, entrepreneurship, family, speaking up against patriarchy, and women empowerment.

"I started an NGO with my husband four years ago. It's called Post For Change and we use it for social change, fight for women empowerment and gender equality."

As part of empowering women, Diipa says every Sunday she gives a shout out to macro and nano women influencers. When I started, it was a lonely place," she says, adding "Now that I am somebody it's nice to use my voice for somebody."

Puma's Indian makeover

Artist-designer Viraj Khanna gives the Puma logo an Indian spin with ari and zardozi embroidery



Square last month. "Puma got in touch with me to bring art and sport together to create this bomber jacket. They liked how I was directly using my artwork for Anamika Khanna and AK-OK,"

"I made two textile artworks as mixed media on paper and then embroidered them."

says Viraj, who has patchworked two figurative textile works on the sleeves that feature abstract art and motifs such as boots, an eye, etc. "I made these initially as mixed media works on paper and then embroidered the same. The embroidery was then used as patchwork," he explains.

Viraj says the process of painting and then embroidering "has been quite interesting because there is a two-fold experimentation". "It is a different experience when embroidering for a particular outfit as opposed to using an existing textile and patching it onto something. When doing the latter, careful cut-outs are required and there is a lot of trial and error. This process made the artwork seem more abstract rather than strongly figurative," says the designer who has used ari and zardozi embroidery for the jacket, and is now working on a new collection (comprising jackets, capes, blazers) at AK-OK that will launch at Lakme Fashion Week next month.

As for his upcoming collection with Puma that will include jackets, track pants, and track suits, Viraj will be cutting and

collaging existing artwork, and crafting embroidery for different outfits. "Embroidery work is something that I've primarily been working with off late. The expanse of materials that can be used help me effectively express myself in different ways. For example, I would use thread and *resham* for a more subtle look and lots of sequins and pearls for something extravagant," he concludes.



Artwork by
Viraj
Khanna.
SPECIAL
ARRANGEMENT

Style file

The fourth edition of PS Carnival by designer Payal Singhal brings all her collections, including her latest edit Fashion in Motion, in a three-day pop-up event at the 1920's Colonial-style bungalow in Bandra West. Expect clothes, accessories and her collaborative range featuring Marshalls, Joey & Pooh, Sangeeta Boochra and Macmerise. There is an exclusive limited collection sale of up to 70% on best-sellers. The brand says that five winners will each receive gift cards valued at ₹25,000. The event is slated to take place from February 23 to 25, 11am to 8pm, at The Vintage Garden, Patkar Bungalow, Bandra West.



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(Bharatanatyam & Dance Drama)

by
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Telugu

The action is fine, smarter writing needed



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In *Eagle*, co-written by director Karthik Gattamneni and Manibabu Karanam, the epilogue packs quite a bit. Had the narrative that led to this portion been riveting, instead of a partially interesting tale, the film would have been sharper.

Eagle begins from the premise of unravelling the truth about a professional sniper who is on the hit list of RAW (Research and Analysis Wing). Nalini (Anupama Parameswaran), a Delhi-based journalist, comes across a superior quality cotton accessory at a crafts bazaar; she is told that the man who helped this weaving movement in Talakona is now missing. Nalini's editor does not see anything important in the story and relegates it to a filler. Soon, the intelligence wing and police force come knocking. Nalini is fired but sets out to find the truth.

Nalini tries to make sense of the bits and pieces of information from people living in the Talakona forest area. They all speak in adulation, fear or both, about the mysterious man whose sharp shooting techniques have earned him the title, *Eagle*.

It takes a long time for the larger picture to be revealed. The narrative goes back and forth in time and introduces us to a medley of characters – Ajay Ghosh as a local MLA, Srinivasa Reddy as his secretary, Mirchi Kiran as the local cop, Srinivas Avasarala as the RAW officer, Madhoo as a RAW senior officer, Praneeta Pattaikai as a former Naxal, and Navdeep as *Eagle*'s friend, Jai.

Ravi Teja plays a world-weary middle-aged character named Sahadev Varma. His brooding presence and demeanour conceals a past. The romance between Ravi Teja and Rachana (Kavya Thapar) happens through sniper vision and this narrative choice comes in handy a little later to underline the issue of the illegal gun trade and its ramifications. Both Ravi Teja and Navdeep are on mark in playing their characters.

Though long drawn, the battle around *Eagle*'s fortress has a few bright moments. The surprises that the fortress holds makes for an engaging large screen action experience.

Told in a straightforward manner, it would be a story of a man who finds his purpose in life, and goes through a change of heart after a fateful turn of events. Through the course of the film, several supporting characters talk in riddles when they narrate *Eagle*'s story and it gets annoying.

Anupama plays Nalini with the tenacity and inquisitiveness required for a journalist.

Eagle tries to navigate issues ranging from cotton weaving to illegal weapon trade, while also trying to be a mainstream Telugu action drama with mass moments. In the process, it struggles to find its rhythm. With sharper writing, it could have been a more engaging action drama.

Eagle is currently running in theatres



Rajinikanth adds vigour

Aishwarya Rajinikanth, in telling a story about how hatred is seeded between Hindus and Muslims, ends up making a superficial social drama that is all over the place

Tamil

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Going by the promo and pre-release interviews of *Lal Salaam*, if you're gearing up for a socio-political sports drama that tells a story of how religious intolerance and hatred enter a cricketing field, you might have been misled a bit. Yes, there are a few scenes set at a cricket ground, the lead characters played by Vishnu Vishal and Vikranth are cricketers, and yes, the film doesn't miss to voice against religious discrimination or segregation in sports; however, cricket is the most negligible aspect of *Lal Salaam* and nothing actually pertaining to the sport propels the story.

Aishwarya Rajinikanth's film is a through-and-through social drama that attempts to demonstrate how the politics of a few sinister men can throw a wedge between two communities, causing irreparable despair and never-ending social unrest. Vishnu Rangasamy's story is written with an earnest desire to throw an empathetic, novel lens over a tricky subject. For instance, in the fictional town of Murrabad, where Muslims and Hindus have lived in harmony, reasons that have nothing to do with religion but more to do with ego and personal vengeance create religious unrest. The architect behind everything that transpires is a politician's son-in-law who uses the personal enmity between two young men and local cricketers – Thirunaavukkarasu (Vishnu Vishal) and Shamsuddin (Vikranth) – to turn the Hindus against the Muslims for political benefit. Using the more vulnerable of these characters, Thiru, as the tool to navigate the story naturally brings in a lot of drama.

However, you only wish the writer pushed himself a bit more or that the story found its way to the hands of better screenwriters or a more composed filmmaker. Not to be mistaken, to much credit, the Aishwarya we see in *Lal Salaam* is a more mature, serious and

Lal Salaam

Director: Aishwarya Rajinikanth

Cast: Vishnu Vishal, Vikranth, Rajinikanth, Senthil, Thambi Ramaiah, Vivek Prasanna

Storyline: When a political ploy creates unrest between two communities, the townsmen, with the help of Moideen bhai, fight to uphold unity and peace

daring filmmaker than who she was nine years ago. Several moments show spark, real filmmaking desire to make an investing drama, but unfortunately, none of the ideas in the story come together to make a cohesive film. There is an utter lack of subtlety in writing, an overreliance on melodrama and Aishwarya's baffling use of voice-over adding to all the woes.

For over 40-50 minutes in the beginning, you are left astounded by how choppy it all seems. Scenes move like blocks, with just Thiru being the thread that runs through them. In an ineffective attempt to tell the story non-linearly, we begin to see the aftereffects of a riot that is said to have been triggered following a clash at a cricket ground when Thiru allegedly attacked Shamsuddin. Thiru has no other option but to surrender to the police, but one can never be sure if he'd be safe even under the eyes of the law, as we are told that the henchmen of Moideen Bhai (Rajinikanth), Shamsuddin's father and business tycoon in Mumbai, are circling above him like vultures.

After six months in prison, Thiru gets released and he realises that his life has now changed forever, with even his own mother and fellow townsmen admonishing him for his actions. Just as you wait eagerly to see what truly

transpired, we get an unnecessary romance subplot between Thiru and his lady love Nandini that serves nothing more than merely becoming a reason for something happening at a later point in the story. This is the biggest issue with the screenplay; the central conflict is kept concealed for so long and when it comes, you are left scratching your head wondering if this technique was needed.

All of that time could have been used to show more about Shamsuddin, a character whose perspective hardly comes through. In fact, Shamsuddin suffers as many or more consequences as Thiru, but he becomes a mere cog in the wheel, only helping to propel his father's arc.

Moideen Bhai is the shadow that runs parallel throughout the film, and if anything, it's this extended cameo from Rajinikanth that truly works for *Lal Salaam*. Aishwarya uses her father's magnetic screen presence, flair, and unshakingly compelling dialogue delivery to her best. Keeping the preachiness apart, watching Rajinikanth hit back at bigots who ask Indian Muslims, "to go to Pakistan," is surely a treat. This was a necessary respite for *Lal Salaam* because though the film wishes to reflect real problems, the world it takes place in, is tailor-made for how the screenwriters wish to move the story, and therefore, everything is extremely convenient. And to remember that all that effort was for such a shallow examination of religious intolerance and sectarianism is truly disappointing.

Even Rahman's use of background scores disappoints you; in every single moment, no matter how organically built, every single emotion gets highlighted with music. What has worked as a big plus for *Lal Salaam* is its casting; if Vishnu and Vikranth bring their best to their respective roles, the actor to look forward to is Senthil who plays a lonely temple priest.

Lal Salaam is the kind of film you wish you liked for how noble its intentions are. But that's all you are left to feel for a film that doesn't try enough to give you more, anything refreshing or anything novel.



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Lal Salaam is currently running in theatres

A social experiment with the heart of a sitcom

Hindi

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As artificial intelligence finds its way into the deep recesses of human emotions, writer-director Amit Joshi and Aradhana Sah have conjured up an unlikely romantic drama between a man and a machine that compels you to log out of logic to realise the matrix of modern-day relationships in a fun way.

Aryan (Shahid Kapoor) is a dashing robotics engineer in the Mumbai office of a US company run by his aunt (Dimple Kapadia). Not ready to commit to anyone, Aryan longs for compatibility and adaptability in a relationship. He makes fun of his friend for being in a marriage where he is being treated like a robot. His middle-class family in Delhi is so desperate to see him settled that Aryan even gets dreams of being hitched to an ungainly bot. When his aunt calls him for a work



assignment to New York, little does he know that he is going to be a lab rat for testing her aunt's most advanced robot Sifra (Kriti Sanon). He falls for Sifra's flawless beauty and perfection in the kitchen and household chores, perhaps, because she is programmed according to his needs and says a cute *theek hai* to everything that he wants. But the

problem begins when the engineer cannot resist her charm even after realising that she is just a piece of software and takes the experiment home.

The secret of Sifra has already been spelt out in trailers, but the emotional hook lies in how the central conceit becomes a metaphor for the demands that the Indian

middle class places on its women. Sifra does not question the tradition and when she flounders, she gets the benefit of the doubt because she is 'manufactured' in America.

Nobody seems to mind that Sifra's smile is plastic. It comments on the larger-than-life expectations of men from modern-day relationships that can only be achieved by a software programme which carries specifically his memories and his choices. By the end, it becomes a cautionary tale where the line between the real and the robotic begins to blur. When Sifra's software begins to play tricks, she gets the same derisive looks that a *bahu* of the family would have received. The writers play on the word *admin* to bring out how men want to be in control but then the machines and women have their ways to survive and upgrade.

However, as the idea is also to create a mass entertainer, the makers keep it light and fluffy on the surface. From the length of the title to the treatment, there is an overt attempt to reach out to a family audience that grew up on *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Small Wonder* and later

relished *Karishma Ka Karishma* and *Bahu Humari Rajinikanth* in their living rooms.

The presence of actors like Rakesh Bedi, Rajesh Kumar and Grusha Kapoor, fondly remembered for their flair in situational humour, ensures that the humour lands well. The strong support cast is led by Dharmendra and Dimple. As symbols of the age of innocent romance, they

Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya

Directors: Amit Joshi and Aradhana Sah

Cast: Shahid Kapoor, Kriti Sanon, Dimple Kapadia, Dharmendra, Rakesh Bedi, Rajesh Kumar, Grusha Kapoor

Storyline: A man falls in love with a humanoid robot and introduces her to his family

are best suited to usher the youth into new possibilities of love.

The script does not provide Shahid the depth of *Her* (2013) to develop his motivation behind gravitating towards Sifra but within the framework of a modern-day fantasy, he manages to develop Aryan's soul connection with a code. Similarly, Kriti walks the thin line between robotic expressions and human emotions to build a credible humanoid character.

The writing could have been sharper and wittier. At many points in the film, you feel that Joshi and Sah have the right plot points but they have not been able to fully milk the potential, leading to a flaccid middle portion that feels like a long skit written for commercial theatre.

A smart twist in the final act and a sassy epilogue leave us with delicious possibilities for future versions of Sifra. There is a scene in the film where Aryan says that the whole idea will make sense one day. True that!

Teri Baaton Main Aisa Uljha Jiya is currently running in theatres



Upgraded

Director: Carlson Young

Cast: Camila Mendes, Archie Renaux, Thomas Kretschmann, Grégory Montel, Lena Olin, Marisa Tomei

Storyline: An art intern meets a dreamboat on a trip to London, she tells a little lie and has to go on lying to keep the fantasy afloat

Snippets



Kalidas Jayaram's *Nila Varum Velai* goes on floors

Actor Kalidas Jayaram who was recently seen in *Aval Peyer Rajni*, has started working on his next project. Titled *Nila Varum Velai*, the film went on floors on February 10 at Palakkad. Produced by Shruthi Nallappa of Miracle Movies, the banner behind films like *Maara* and *Trigger*, the new film is a period supernatural thriller and will be a bilingual film simultaneously made in Tamil and Telugu.

Helmed by *Enna Solla Pogirai*-fame Hari, the film's Tamil version will star Kalidas as the lead while the yet-to-be-titled Telugu version will feature Satyadev Kancharana as the protagonist.

More details on the cast and crew are expected to be announced soon.



Vishnu Varadhan to helm debut film of Murali's son Akash

Director Vishnu Varadhan is back to Tamil cinema and his next project will mark the debut of Akash Murali, the son of late actor Murali and younger brother of Atharvaa.

The untitled film, also starring Aditi Shankar, is bankrolled by Master producer Xavier Britto of XB Film Creators. Said to be a love story, the film's shooting has been wrapped up.

The rest of the cast includes Sarath Kumar, Prabhu Ganesan, Khushbu Sundar, Kalki Koelchin, Shiv Pandit and George Kora. Vishnu Varadhan's frequent collaborator Yuvan Shankar Raja is handling the film's music while veteran editor Sreekar Prasad is also on board.



Pawan Kalyan's OG gets a release date

Pawan Kalyan's *OG* has got a release date. Directed by Sujeeth, the movie will hit the screens on September 27. The film is set against the backdrop of Mumbai mafia.

The film, a gangster drama, went on floors in April 2023. Emraan Hashmi, who is set to make his Telugu debut, will play the antagonist in the movie. Priyanka Mohan is the female lead of the film. The movie is produced by DVV Entertainment.

Ravi K Chandran is the cinematographer while Thaman S is the music composer of *OG*. The music director had previously worked for Pawan Kalyan's *Vakeel Saab*, *Bheemla Nayak*, and *Bro*.

A low-stakes rom-com

English

Mini Anthikad Chhibber

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Do you dream of flying first class to London and meeting a person who looks good, is rich and loves children? Would you tell little white lies to ensure inroads into the dreamboat's life? *Upgraded*, the latest rom-com from Amazon, is a paean to the joys and rewards of following the precepts of the "fake it till you make it" school.

Ana (Camila Mendes) has a double degree in Art History. She escapes her life in Florida selling paintings of boats to rich retirees to come to New York City. She lives in her sister's rent-controlled apartment, sleeping on the futon (not couch mind you) while trying to educate her brother-in-law about the finer points of art when he would rather have a puppy.

Ana has got an art internship at

this posh auction house, which she hopes will earn her enough social capital to set up her gallery. Her boss, Claire (Marisa Tomei), is a scary ice queen in the best Miranda Priestly tradition. After catching a horrendous mistake in the catalogue, Ana gets a chance to accompany Claire to London on a business trip as a third assistant.

Assistants 1 and 2 – Suzette (Rachel Matthews) and Renee (Fola Evans-Akingbola) – are naturally vicious and mean. The ticket agent feels sorry for Ana and upgrades her to first class – I would love to meet such a generous soul, especially on a 17-hour flight to Sao Paulo.

It is time for the meet-cute, as Ana spills her bloody Mary on William (Archie Renaux), and with the two seated next to each other, they chat away easily. Ana lets him believe she is the director of the auction house and not a lowly minion.

Ana swirls into London high society thanks to William's mum, Catherine (Lena Olin), an actress. There is another auction, a multi-million dollar sale, rivalries,

difficult-to-get tickets for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (did Catherine mean Branagh when she said she would ask Ken?), lunch reservations, as well as William coaching at-risk children.

The big reveal and misunderstandings are easily got out of the way, thankfully minus the mad dash to the airport. And six months later, all is set right with everyone's dreams coming true, including Ana's brother-in-law getting a gorgeous Great Dane.

Mendes follows up her Veronica Lodge from *Riverdale* with a spirited performance and Tomei is watchable as always. Julian Marx (Anthony Head) as the absinthe-swilling dead artist is fitfully fun. *Upgraded* is the very definition of a safe fantasy where everything is in its place and goes along its designated path. If that is all you are looking for from your movie fix, then *Upgraded* will comfortably hit the sweet spot.

Upgraded is currently streaming on Prime Video

Grimly glorious sports biopic

This uneven retelling of the triumphs and tragedies of the Von Erich wrestling family is rendered gripping by the fights and performances



English

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Sports movies are sure-fire winners given the scope for drama, tears and the joy of a hard-fought triumph at the end. We all love an underdog, and the grand tradition of a sports film focusses on the realisation of a dream overcoming all sorts of obstacles.

Sean Durkin's *The Iron Claw*, however, which focusses on the Von Erich family and features three generations of wrestlers, is quite a crushing downer. There is no triumphant ride into the sunset for Kevin (Zac Efron), the only surviving son of the five Von Erich boys. There is, however, a kind of peace that Kevin achieves, and we, the bruised and battered audience, are happy for him.

The movie starts with the patriarch Fritz Von Erich (Holt McCallany) telling his sons, Kevin and Jack Jr, that the only way to take on the world is by being stronger and better than everyone else. There is mention of the Von Erich curse which Fritz wishes to defeat with strength, and his wife Doris (Maura Tierney) with religion.

The film moves ahead to 1979 where

The Iron Claw

Director: Sean Durkin

Starring: Zac Efron, Jeremy Allen White, Harris Dickinson, Maura Tierney, Holt McCallany, Lily James

Storyline: The true story of the legendary Von Erich wrestling family

Kevin and his brothers, David (Harris Dickinson) and Mike, (Stanley Simons) are sitting to breakfast. Fritz, who has built up the World Class Championship Wrestling (WCCW), and ever the believer in tough love, tells Mike to bulk up. Kerry (Jeremy Allen White), another of the Von Erich boys, is off training for the



Olympics, while Kevin has just won the Texas NWA Heavyweight Champion, and David shows promise.

Mike, however, is interested in music, and Kevin feels his father is pushing his brother too hard. Kevin meets Pam (Lily James) after a match and a sweet romance grows between the two.

As tragedy after tragedy strikes the Von Erich family, you are left wondering if it is the curse brought on by changing the family name from Adkisson to Von Erich, or thanks to the toxic masculinity as preached and propounded by Fritz. There is also a fatigue that sets in with each sling and arrow from outraged fortune. Durkin, a fan of professional wrestling and fascinated by the Von Erich family, chose not to include the story of the youngest son Chris, who died by suicide, as he said in an interview, "it was one more tragedy that the film couldn't really withstand," and we are thankful for that.

Where the film works is in the brutally choreographed fights and the exceptional cast. Efron is the still centre, the trembling rock in the midst of all the grief, yearning and loss, while White uses his expressive eyes and pauses to great effect. *The Iron Claw* is difficult viewing for multiple reasons while also being thrilling and affirmative in as many ways.

The Iron Claw is currently running in theatres