

THE LEELA

M A G A Z I N E



Raza's Legacy

The specialists of regional cuisine

India's food history and evolution is myriad, changing in ingredients and flavour every few hundred kilometres. From cooking techniques to the use of locally available produce, our regional cuisine is full of hidden culinary gems that need to be preserved for future generations. Kriti Saraswat-Satpathy meets the chefs that are taking on this onus.

Chef Vanika Choudhary, owner of Sequel and Noon (Photo: Anurag Banerjee)

Ladakh

Before turning chef and owner of Sequel and Noon in Mumbai, Chef Vanika Choudhary was the COO of a media company. But she found her true calling when she landed in Ladakh for a trek. "Ladakh has a special place in my heart as it's where I was inspired to start working in food. That's why I decided to make Ladakhi cuisine the core of what we do at Noon, even though I am not from the region," she reveals.

She explains that Ladakhi cuisine is all about ancient family recipes using foraged herbs native to the region, passed down from one generation to the next. Working closely with women farmers from Ladakh and her friend Kunzes Angmo, Chef Choudhary has learnt and perfected several Ladakhi recipes including Yarkhandi Pulao (a red meat-based dish made of caramelised carrots and onions), Khambir (sourdough roti seasoned with various ingredients), Chhutagi (Ladakhi whole wheat pasta) and Khura (ceremonial biscuit made during Ladakh New Year). She recreates them at Noon using authentic ingredients like black buckwheat, wild nettle, pigeon peas, wild garlic chives and more from the region.

"My goal is to highlight the cuisine and ingredients of Ladakh, especially those that never make it to the mainstream dining scene. I also want to bring these women to the forefront who have been custodians of recipes and cultures that are unique but are being forgotten, so that they can be preserved," she adds.

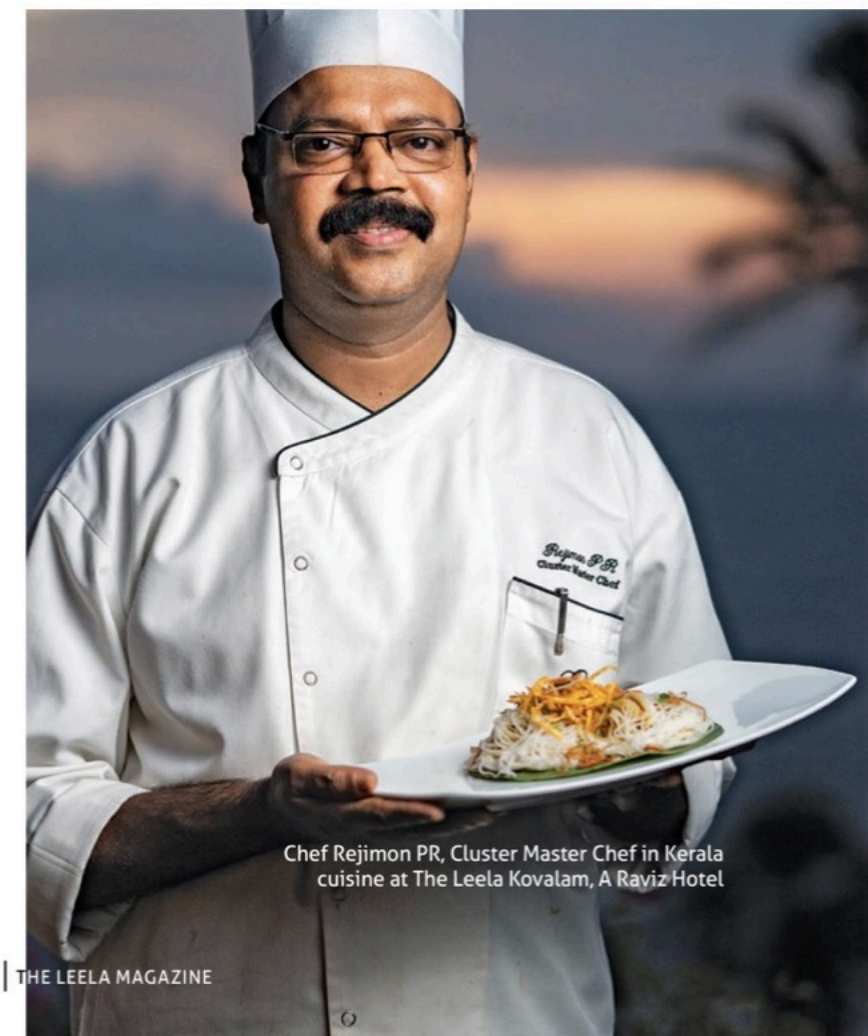
Kerala

A native of Vechoor from Kerala's Kottayam district, Chef Rejimon PR grew up watching his grandmother run a restaurant and often helped her in the kitchen. Later, his move to Ernakulam presented him an opportunity to join one of the busiest restaurants there, further honing his culinary skills. Today, he is the Cluster Master Chef in Kerala cuisine at The Leela Kovalam, A Raviz Hotel and The Leela Ashtamudi, A Raviz Hotel.

"Some of the main ingredients that define the cuisine of Kerala include black peppercorn, curry leaves, cardamom, bay leaf and coconut in all forms — dry, desiccated, milk, oil, etc. These ingredients are easily available all over Kerala and the ratio or cooking techniques used in various regions reflect the unique flavour profile," he explains. Having mastered the cuisine, his signature dishes include Uppumanga Pulissery (his grandma's recipe of brined raw mango kadhi), Seafood Thengai Paal (mild coconut broth with curry leaf and chilli



Chhutagi in the making (Photo: Anurag Banerjee)



Chef Rejimon PR, Cluster Master Chef in Kerala cuisine at The Leela Kovalam, A Raviz Hotel



A taste of Kerala cuisine



Goan dishes at O Pedro
(Photo: Hunger Inc Hospitality)

tempering with fresh seafood bisque) and Vazhaipoo Elaneer Payasam (a sweet dish of tender coconut and young banana blossoms, slow-cooked with a hint of cardamom). "After travelling the length and breadth of Kerala and visiting numerous traditional households, I hope to one day write a cookbook to share these long-forgotten recipes with the world," says the chef.

Goa

As the Executive Chef at O Pedro in Mumbai, Chef Hussain Shahzad worked under the mentorship of renowned (late) Chef Floyd Cardoz, a Goan and former culinary director of Hunger Inc Hospitality, imbibing the intricacies of Goan cuisine. "A lot of the dishes on O Pedro's menu are recipes inspired by Chef Floyd's mother's style of cooking, along with other recipes we learnt from different families in Goa," he says.

Goan cuisine offers a unique fusion of flavours and cooking styles that has influences of its colonial past, Portuguese culture, along with local spices, creative use of ingredients such as wine and vinegar, and also a wide variety of breads. "Ingredients like kokum, tamarind, vinegar, dried mango, along with coconut come together to create the vibrant flavours that characterise Goan cuisine," he adds.

At O Pedro, one can find regional classics like Goan Fish Curry, Serradura, Smoked Pork Sorpotel, Prawn Balchao and more in an elevated manner. For Chef Shahzad, using innovative cooking methods and ingredient combinations while staying true to the authentic flavours of Goa are imperative. "I feel that Goan cuisine is an under-represented part of our country's diverse regional culinary offering, and it is important to showcase and celebrate it at a national and global level," he says.

Rajasthan

The Chef De Cuisine at The Leela Palace Jaipur, Chef Rajendra Singh Shekhawat hails from Rajasthan and derives his culinary inspiration from the region. While specialties like Dal Baati Churma, Gatte ki Sabzi, Laal Maas and Ker Sangri enjoy popularity, according to him, exploring lesser-known Rajasthani dishes can help preserve culinary heritage and introduce diners to a broader range of flavours. "The culinary landscape of Rajasthan is diverse, incorporating a rich tapestry of unique flavours, intricate cooking methods and distinctive ingredients that collectively form a captivating gastronomic experience. My specialty is Maas ki Baati that



Chef Hussain Shahzad, Executive Chef,
O Pedro (Photo: Hunger Inc Hospitality)



Chef Rajendra Singh Shekhawat,
Chef De Cuisine at The Leela Palace Jaipur

holds a significant place within the realm of forgotten traditional recipes from Rajasthan, tracing its origins back to the era of wartime necessity," shares the chef.

Explains Chef Ravish Mishra, Executive Chef at The Leela Palace Udaipur, "Rajasthani cuisine evolved in search of food that could last for several days and could be eaten without heating. Scarcity of water and fresh vegetables have had their effect on the cooking techniques and also affected the end product. The cuisine is also majorly influenced by royal kitchens and recipes from khansamas (royal cooks). The art of creating abundance with very little resources drew me towards the cuisine of Rajasthan." His specialty is Gol Maas Kaachar, a delicacy of lamb cooked with wild cucumber.

North India

Known for slow and open fire cooking as well as traditional Indian flavours, Chef Amninder Sandhu fell in love with north Indian cuisine when she saw the making of roomali roti and kebab. "Anything that is skill-intensive catches my attention, especially traditional recipes that have been passed on from generations and take time to perfect. We are all custodians of certain flavours and our childhood memories of food play an

important role in what we find comforting to eat. For instance, I've added my mother's recipe of Hay Smoked Jungli Murgi (thick jowar roti with charred spring onions and chicken stuffed Bhavnagri chillies) to my menu in Bawri, Goa as I grew up eating that," says the chef who is also the founder of Bliss Food Experiences, Ammu and Nora.

She elaborates that north Indian cuisine uses rich ingredients like ghee, dry fruits, saffron, basmati rice etc, and is often cooked in heavy-bottomed pans, allowing for slow cooking that lends a beautiful aroma and distinctive flavour. "I believe we should take pride and celebrate classics like Butter Chicken, Dal Makhni, Raan Biryani and Kakori Kebabs which are universally loved dishes," she adds. Her ultimate dream lies in writing a 'Larousse Gastronomique' equivalent book for Indian cuisine. "That's a legacy I want to leave behind," she says.

Karnataka

Having worked for nearly two decades in Karnataka, Chef Giri Manni, Chef de Cuisine, Citrus, The Leela Palace Bengaluru, is adept in the region's cuisine and has mastered breakfast dishes of Karnataka. "As most guests of the hotel have



Rajasthani cuisine at
Mohan Mahal,
The Leela Palace Jaipur



"I was captivated by the rich culinary heritage of Karnataka, which offers a diverse range of flavours and ingredients. Exploring unique dishes, traditional cooking techniques and cultural influences intrigued me and led me to specialise in Karnataka cuisine."

Chef Rajesh Roy, Executive Chef
at The Leela Bhartiya City Bengaluru



Chef Amninder Sandhu

breakfast in-house, I get an opportunity to serve my specials and share the true, local flavours of the region with them," he says. Many staple dishes come from different parts of the state, adding a unique flavour using fresh herbs, spices, local vegetables and millets. Think Coorg Pandi Curry, Mangalorean Biryani, Udupi Sambar, Mysore Masala Dosa etc. Chef Manni wants to stay true to the roots, retaining authentic flavours that he can pass on to the next generation.

Chef Rajesh Roy, Executive Chef at The Leela Bhartiya City Bengaluru, specialises in making different variations of mutton pepper, along with other regional specialties of Karnataka. Inspired by his mother, his passion for food was ingrained from a young age. "I was captivated by the rich culinary heritage of Karnataka, which offers a diverse range of flavours and ingredients. Exploring unique dishes, traditional cooking techniques and cultural influences intrigued me and led me to specialise in Karnataka cuisine," he reveals. Using handmade masalas, authentic ingredients and fresh produce bring out the true flavours of the region.

Nagaland

Growing up with parents who were avid foodies and loved



North Indian
cuisine at Bawri



Chef Salangyanger Jamir

experimenting in the kitchen, Chef Salangyanger Jamir fell in love with his native Naga cuisine and knew he would cook for a living. "As I travelled to different places, I realised that many people thought of Naga food as smelly, spicy and bizarre. I wanted people to know that our Naga cuisine is warm, tasty and most importantly, edible. Nagaland has several tribes and each one has their own signature dishes, but the use of rare spices and produce native to the region makes this cuisine unique," he says.

Dishes like Smoked Pork In Axone (fermented soybean), Moudi (a traditional dish cooked with big chunks of pork and beef with blood), Chicken/Fish In Fermented Bamboo Shoot are specialties of Nagaland. Most ingredients used in this cuisine are also procured from farmers of a specific region as each grows and preserves a certain crop. Think stink beans, perilla seeds, king chilli and yam.

Having won the Naga Chef title, authored a book 'Naga Appetite: A Collection of Essential Recipes' and promoted his native cuisine around the world through different collaborations, the chef is determined to explore new possibilities to keep reviving Naga cuisine with innovative methods. ◉



Naga Crispy Pork Salad