

# BRUNCH

## Gourmet getaway

What happens when a lover of fast food and baked beans infiltrates a group of gourmands and chefs at a stunning riverside resort?



**WHAT HAPPENS** in Vegas stays in Vegas. What happens in Ganga Kutir is also supposed to stay put there. But armed with my unique skills of befriendng the enemy, not only did I survive two days of the dangerously seductive company of hardcore foodies who knew their satées from their satays and their dal maas from their red snapper, but I also came away alive from a situation where I, lover of KFC, paratha rolls and baked beans, had started to grow

ured of what some people call fine eating. I started innocuously when Varun Tull, of Delhi's pan-Asian restaurant Yum Yum called me up one evening. I was putting that lash of Tabasco sauce on my bowl of Kakaji when he asked me whether I'd like to go on a 'net getaway'. I nearly choked on a big piece of on hearing that someone thought I'd be part of something gastronomical. "It's this new resort in a village near Calcutta called Ganga Kutir where a

few of us will spend two days to eat, cook, talk and watch food. Whaddya say?" he said. "Sure. Sounds great," I said, calculating that 48 hours spent in a place I had never been to would be 48 hours away from a computer screen on which I receive the friendly mail every month: "To facilitate collection of your reimbursement claims, a HR representative will be available at the Delhi and NCR offices".

So a few weeks later, I sped off from Calcutta to Raichak next to the mighty Ganga. Some two hours later, I entered the swinging iron gates of Ganga Kutir which, along with the older resort, The Fort, is real estate magnate Harsh Neotia's getaway place that he decided to expand into a dream resort.

Welcoming me warmly was Harsh's missus, Madhu, who whisked me into the large, cool expanses of a room with the sign 'Library' which was literally next to the pool which in turn was literally next to the grey, throbbing expanse of the river.

I was the first to have arrived from outside Calcutta. I slurped a bit of my aam panna and happily bit into the bit-sized yummys that came with a cuppa. (Madhu: "What tea would you have?") Me: "Um..." Madhu: "Assam, Darjeeling, Camomile, Earl Grey..." Me: "Um..." Madhu: "Good choice, one Earl Grey for Indrajit.") Quickly, I was given a tour of the place. It was fabulous. Grey fat clouds in the twilight, hanging above the grey fat river. All I needed was to stand facing the Ganga and light up an 84 mm incense stick in my mouth to set my much cabined, cribbed and confined soul free.

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IT WASN'T VERY LONG TILL THE STAR attractions arrived. Covering in the corner, trying desperately to remember how 'hors d'oeuvre' is pronounced, I saw the rasoI masters congregating around a round table a scone's throw away from the pool that was a muffin's throw away from the river.

Like all writers are readers but not all readers are writers, all chefs are gourmands but not all gourmands are chefs. But the two tribes around the table had started to simmer. An excited Varun Tull (did he fall into a vat of cocaine as a baby?) was chatting with ad man and Equus Red Cell CEO Swapan Seth about some fab shack that the latter had taken him to for lunch in Calcutta. Food writer Rahul 'Chuchun' Verma was telling Highway On A Plate co-host Rocky Singh about yet another facet of eastern UP anti-social social behaviour: Chef, owner of

**GOURMET ISLAND**

Clockwise from bottom left: Murgir jhol; The spread at the Mushaimaaner Khabar dinner; Prawns cooking; Bengali biryani with its characteristic egg; Country hooch



**GREAT ESCAPE**

Ganga Kutir was fabulous. Grey fat clouds in the twilight, hanging above the grey fat river

Delhi restaurant Magique, and feeder of prime ministers and presidents Marut Sikka was listening in on a conversation between Channa Daswatte, the Sri Lankan architect who had designed Ganga Kutir, and hosts Harsh and Madhu Neotia. Food writer Marryam H Reshii was looking at me looking at food. And travel photographer Sanjay Ramchandran was looking at molecular gastronomy specialist Abhijit Saha, chef of Bangalore restaurant Caperryberry, who perilously walked up to me and introduced himself.

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WHICH WAS AROUND WHEN, WITH THE help of a wine-seeking Rahul Verma, I discovered the bar up the stairs with its sheet-of-glass wall overlooking the Ganga. Thus began my first round of Jack Daniel's topped with Coca-Cola that evening. It would help to ease me, ketchup artist gastrologer, into the exalted company of the gathered gastronomers. My source (read: the pamphlet in my room) had warned me that a gong would be sounded to announce dinner. But before dinner, there was a treat from Rocky 'Dude' Singh. He had managed to arrange a bottle of 'bangla' - local hooch - that was tastefully plonked on the table.

This was, I noticed, quite a posh bottle of hooch. For one, it had a clearly marked label that read with Bengali-English bilingual directness: "Lablled (sic) and capsuled country spirit. Strength 50 U.P. Measure 600 ML." For another, returning the brandless bottle to the vendor would get you ₹5 back from its original ₹43 price. "Let's go for it," Rocky said, putting his beer aside as if it was a child that needed to be placed somewhere safe. The bottle was passed around for a sniff. Noses that have smelt the finest spices, the subtlest of oflac-



# EAT YOUR HEARTS OUT

Low down in the food chain, Indrajit Hazra infiltrates a group of gourmands and chefs at a stunning riverside resort and returns to tell a fishy tale

tory tones, shrivelled in what had been intended as mock disgust and ended as the genuine thing. But Rocky, whose aim in life is to try and eat everything that walks, is no chap who'll walk away from anything that's still. A glug of bangla and the verdict was: "Dude, this is bad shit. This is dangerous shit." I had a sip and...

...I HEARD THE GONG RING OUT. DINNER was served. It could have been the Jack'n'Coke. It could have been the draught of hoose. But there I was, in the conference room transformed into a banquet hall with a giant vase filled with rajsandhas and candle lamps glowing before every plate, two apparitions who had joined the fray: epicurean and journo from the second best newspaper in the land, Baschi Kurkaria, and star designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee. I would learn, much after my hangover had lifted the next day, that Sabyasachi was the man who had 'stylised' our whole two days of stay, menu and table decor included.

This was the first night's dinner and it was to be 'The Zamindari Experience'. A menu was curled up on every plate and, as if this was the opening show at the Lakme Fashion Week, everyone waited for the litany of dishes to sashay on to our plates - Gobindobhog rice, ruti, jhuri alu bhaja (very thinly sliced fried mouschy potato), muger dal, mochar ghonto (lanana leaf dish), alu potoler dalna (alu parwal curry), daab chingri (prawn in a cocunut shell), fish puturi (leaf-wrapped steamed fishes), pathar mangshur jhol (mutton curry) or mangir jhol (chicken curry), jalpalyer chutney (olive chutney), lai doi (tred dahi) and Bengali sweets like chandrapuli, narikel nandu and sharbhuja that there's not much point translating beyond stating that the last item elicits a mini-orgasm among those who equate fried cream with ecstasy.

Alas, with Jack'n'Coke surging through my blood



## MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY SPECIALIST ABHIJIT SAHA MADE A PRAWN AIOLI



## AFTER MY HANGOVER LIFTED, I LEARNED THAT SABYASACHI HAD 'STYLISTED' OUR STAY

stream and the rains doing their own mixing of drinks with the river outside, the second last thing on my mind was food (the last being eating food). So while I affably explained to the person sitting on my right that the small earthen katori holding solidified ghee was not wax from the candles, and that the ghee should be scraped off and sprinkled truffles-style on to the mound of rice for some wonderful, unhealthy flavour, all I could hear were general sounds of mmsms to the food that was being rapidly consumed in large quantities all around me.

It was while Abhijit Saha was explaining the gastronomic architecture of the fish puturi that I had the sudden urge to remove the giant vase with the flowers from the middle of the long table. Rocky was in agreement and we made an honest attempt to lift and move it. Eating stopped as the food'n'travel programme host and the, well, me, turned the vase over. No damage was done but...

...THE NEXT DAY, AT LUNCH, ROCKY AND I were 'requested' to sit next to Harsh, who knew, among many other worthies in Calcutta, the police commissioner. But more about the lunch later.

I woke up the day after 'The Zamindari Experience' with the distinct memory of hugging Sabyasachi and telling him how much I liked his, er, movies. But then I told myself that zamindars were expected to get blotto. As I clambered down from my room - and after I apologised to Sabyasachi - I noticed the whole foodie lot, now joined by food'n'travel magazine Upper Crust editor Farzana Contractor, congregated for some kind of show.

It turned out that I was just in time for - you guessed it! - cook'n'taste. Each expert foodie would come up to the table with a stove and all the ingredients required to whip up a signature dish right in front of the audience, that would then taste the food smack off the tawa. My patience for food shows on TV is legendary. Not even Nigella Lawson's famous close-ups can hold my attention. So, yes, I was curious how I, who can't cook anything beyond toast and tea, would enjoy the next few hours watching people play Kitchen Theatre.

The first one on the pitch was Caperberry gastro-artist Abhijit Saha. "I'm going to cook a prawn aioli," he announced. (I think he said 'aioli'). "I'll start with olive oil here. Marinate the prawn, um, the salt's missing..." The prawn went into a pan - he called it something else, but for you and I, it's a pan - and cooked up a crackle, spreading the aroma across the room, over the river and perhaps to Nandigram, that cluster of villages that made Mamata Banerjee venomous, which lies 90 minutes

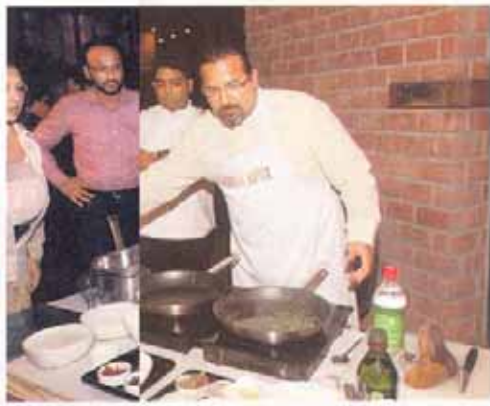


**WHAT A DISH**  
Clockwise from top left: Editor of Upper Crust Farzana Contractor with designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee; Co-host Highway On My Plate Rocky Singh whips up a chicken khaprow; chef-owners Varun Tuli of Yum Yum Tree (left) and Marut Sikka of Magique dig into Mushalmaaner Khahar

away on the other side of the river. Meanwhile, everyone gathered around the table. Cameras clicked as white wine was added (what a waste!). Karl leaves were strewn with a dash of garlic in the end. Applause followed.

Marut next, with his variation of a Kerala coast dish involving fish. "I'm traditional in my cooking, he kept saying, making me wonder whether there was daal may kach kala. It turned out that he was neither making daal nor was he kidding about the 'tradition' bit as he mixed lemon juice, coconut oil ("Any oil will do but mustard oil talous over the flavour so should be avoided") into the pun ("I like cooking this in a laganan, a variant between a kadhi and a flat pan") and brought out, according to my dodgy palate, a coconut-flavoured, yellow gravy-doused fish prep.

Varun had been waiting for his turn. His dish was Thai green egg curry. "For the vegetarians



**A SHOT AT SOMETHING ELSE**  
Farzana Contractor, editor of Upper Crust, takes aim at architect Channa Daswatti who designed Ganga Kutir

here". Poor chap, Madhu Neotia, all enthusiastic, yet vegetarian, doesn't eat eggs either. But a sweet gesture. Tuli knows his food drama. He doesn't 'believe' in measurements. "I prefer to feel, smell my way through," he said. (Isn't that a Deepak Chopra line?) When Varun talked about the need to squeeze the lime leaf with one's fingers to "get the oils out", Marut asked a valid question. "Varun,

what's wrong with a mixie?" The answer was that "the flavour gets crushed and lost in a mixie". I think the real answer is that Varun loves the film *Juice & Juice* while Marut prefers *Ratatouille*. Along with galangal (young ginger), green onions and green chillies are added. Understandably, the result is green Thai curry.

BUT IT WAS AFTER ALL THIS PANTOMIME that the real piece de resistance of our trip happened. Once again, we were in the conference/banquet room. The people serving food had switched costumes - no more the white dhoti-kurta-sari 'Durga puja'-type zamindari kit. Now, they were all in village gear: brown earthy colours, shorter dhatis with a gamucha (thin red cotton towel) used to wipe the body after a bath or manual work) tied around their waists. This was also Sabyasachi's doing - the anti-posh Bengal rock'n'fish roll look at the "Grameen Anshar" (village grub) lunch.

Sitting next to host Harsh, the moment I put the neem begun (fried neem leaves and bignun pieces) in my mouth, I asked for more. The deep bitter of the neem, fighting with the pillow texture of the tiny bits of halgini took me somewhere else. I could see Marryam on the other side, negotiating with the preparation. Farzana, at our table, thought it was an "acquired taste". I couldn't agree more.

Along with hal saag (red spinach) and the highly highly potent and munchy puti mach bhaja (fried puti, a tiny fish), this was heaven entered through the mouth and paved with memories of



## THE ZAMINDARI EXPERIENCE WAS LIKE THE OPENING SHOW OF LAKME FASHION WEEK

my grandmother's cooking. The meal was tied at the end with the king of sweets, the mihidana, an orange caviar-looking dessert most famously made in Bardhaman. Even as I write this, I'm feeling a sensory rush tied to memories that would have got greater writers to start a desi version of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Move over Anthony Bourdain, Gordon Ramsay and Kylie Kwong. Whoever prepared this spread deserves to own the Michelin tyre company.

WHAT FOLLOWED THIS EPIPHANIC LUNCH, washed down by non-negotiable urban beer, was the exact opposite. At the 'library', there was a contentious discussion on food critics and food writing. Swapan Seth pooh-poohed the idea of everyone getting to know about a fab place to eat



**WELCOME EVERYONE**  
Hosts Harsh and Madhu Neotia at the Mushalmaaner Khahar (Muslim food) dinner

simply by reading about it; Varun Tuli countered him by saying that it was a write-up (in this venerable magazine, actually) that brought the borders to his Yum Yum tables; Marut Sikka bemoaned the ignorance of most 'food journalists' whose stupid, poison pens can run a restaurant into the ground. And there was me dying to say something intelligent, but restricting myself to nods and intermittent "Anyone for beer?" announcements, all the while thinking that negative reviews from people who can't cook are as necessary as film reviews by people who can't make films but know a rotten film from a decent one.

Then there was Abhijit Saha with his PowerPoint presentation on molecular gastronomy which, if I got him right, was reverse engineering food from the molecular level up and serving dishes as installation art. He went through the veneration of the patron saint of molecular biology, er, sorry, gastronomy, Heston Blumenthal and his legendary London eatery (is it okay to call it an eatery?), The Fat Duck. He went on to talk about the Salad Caprese Deconstruction and the Black Forest Deconstruction, which looked like one of those John Paul Gaultier clothes, but sounded like a Jacques Derrida exposition at my old university. "We know how far away the planets are, but we don't really know what happens in a soufflé," Abhijit quoted someone apparently famous in the culinary universe. What the fat duck does it mean? Why on earth would anyone want to know what happens in a soufflé? You want to eat it, not write a psychological thriller about it.

By the time he started explaining the "osmotic process of frying in water that mimics frying", I was wondering why anyone would want to make something that tastes like, say, a beef burger but that isn't and looks like a pretty stem cell experiment. But hey, what do I know?

So imagine my extreme relief when, before the last dinner of our getaway - a 'Mushalmaaner Khahar' (Muslim food) spread where I just touched my mutton biryani (with egg, since this was Bengali-style biryani) - Swapan Seth, more notable for his fine taste than his highly nuanced palate, started asking everyone: "Who's the best chef in India? Don't dodge the question now. Who's the best?" No one gave a proper answer.

As I sped off from Gurgaon Island the next day, leaving a place temporarily inhabited by a bunch of strange folk, most of whom had a talent for cooking but didn't quite know how to spend their time between their cooking time and eating time, I realised what a narrow escape I had had. An escape not from Ganga Kutir but from the clutches of some very nice, convincing, weird people who seem to talk, breathe, and even eat food all the time. Like a crow that had escaped a turkey coop, I was going back to the land where they don't feed your food, but just eat it.

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