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THE SECOND EDITION OF GOURMET GETAWAY AT GANGA KUTIR FROM SEPTEMBER 17 TO 19, IN ASSOCIATION WITH t2, WAS AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER



There were some lessons learnt from the first Gourmet Getaway held earlier this year at Ganga Kutir. First, Day Zero of GG calls for calorie compensation in advance, something on the lines of a detox. That helps take care of the third G inadvertently involved in any GG — guilt. And it's only when you tackle this one that you can really enjoy the first two — the gourmet and the getaway. Second, nothing remotely figure-hugging goes into the bag. Only easy-breezy, foodie-friendly fashion will do. Third, no track pants and tees. Nothing that would lend itself to a yoga class in case it wriggled its way into the itinerary. Fourth and final, pack Digene. Half-check and check, check, check.

THE UNOFFICIAL START

Lifestyle journalism involves many sacrifices. Giving up a Thursday night in the city watching good TV (*How I Met Your Mother* is good TV) to reach Raichak a night before everyone else is one such sacrifice. So Sabyasachi Mukherjee and I left Calcutta at 12.20am.

He had his reason (he was styling the event) and I had mine — well, many including avoiding peak traffic, to get an extra night on that milky white cloud of a mattress with chocolates on the bedside table, and the chance to wake up with a full view of the infinity pool merging into the Hooghly.

So the Gourmet Getaway of September 2010 began in the dead of the night of September 16, a little after midnight. And it is on the drive down that a buttery bag of ACT II was torn open to spill copious amounts of popped corn. Simple pleasures.

DAY ONE

BREAKFAST

The official time for the kick-off of Gourmet Getaway wasn't till 5pm, but fabulous food follows no clock. A full south Indian breakfast it is. Idli(s), dosa, vada, two chutneys (at least) and a super healthy bowl of sambhar. Add to it a tall lassi and a platter of fruits and it's guaranteed to leave you fuller than any English breakfast in the world. Nap time for some. Work time for others.

LUNCH

The food mood was set by sharp showers. The restaurant at Ganga Kutir served up a steaming *khichudi*. Very healthy looking (too healthy for Sabya who couldn't stop pouring ghee over it). And then that smell filled the air. Uh ho. The unmistakable, sumptuous scent of a bevy of *bhajas*.



*Bhajas* of every kind. *Begun bhaja*, *jhuri alu bhaja*, *ilish maach bhaja*, *deem bhaja*. And once again, nap time for some, work time for others.

But sometimes work can be a blast. Sabya pulled on swimming trunks and dived into the infinity pool on the pretext of dotting it with lotus and leaves!

THE OFFICIAL START

The guest gang started arriving around teatime. Foodies from across the country descended. Restaurateurs like Marut Sikka,



Abhijit Saha, Varun Tuli, food photographer Sanjay Ramchandran, TV personality and foodie Rocky Singh, Farzana Contractor of *Upper Crust* magazine, fashion designer Kiran Uttam Ghosh, ad man Swapan Seth and many media professionals, all bound by the F-factor.

ZAMINDARI BHOG

"There is no greater love than the love for food. So I'm in the company of many Casanovas!" toasted Rocky with his groomed goatee and greased ponytail as everyone settled down in the boardroom for dinner at the

sound of a gong at 10pm. Yes, the boardroom. But transformed into a dining room in true Sabyasachi style. A hazy mist welcomed us, the top-note of which was *dhuno*, followed by jasmine and tuberose. *Khadi* upholstery and runners and a *rajnigandha* centrepiece towering over the table, columns of candles perfumed with jasmine, *kansa* crockery and cutlery, staff dressed in starched white dhoti-kurta and *lal paar* saris.

A wedge of lime and green chilli was already on the platter. The next six courses followed, one by one. *Gobindobhog* rice and *haath ruti* came first. "Ghee to be ladled" read the printed menu tucked inside an old bound book placed near each plate. *Moong Dal* never tasted yummier. *Jhuri Alu Bhaja*, yummy as always. The famous *Daab Chingri* and *Paturi* (*bekti* and *hilsa*) came. In between there was *Mochar Ghonto*, *Alu Potoler Dalna* and *Parse Shorse*. By the time the fourth course (*Mangshor Jhol*, *Murgir Jhol* and *Chhanar Dalna*) arrived, everyone was stuffed but no one was stopping. Oohs and aahs galore.

Finally, *Jolpaiyer Chutney* was dolloped onto our plates and the topic of discussion turned to the tart fruit, which many were not aware was an Indian olive. Four *mishtis* rounded off the night (at least the food part; the bar was open till much later). After what seemed like an infinite menu, the kitchens were finally exhausted. And just when it seemed nothing more could possibly pass through our lips, a *churan* and *paan* platter screamed for attention. Has anyone ever needed a digestive to digest a digestive?

Hobbling down a stuffed trail towards elusive sleep, it must have occurred to every gourmand at the getaway that the words "no, thank you" should be employed more often, and with greater accuracy.

The very words to use at the breakfast table. No solid food would be required till lunch. Maybe just a fruit. Or two.

## DAY TWO

Another gorgeous glance at the Hooghly and the pool in gleaming blue. No breakfast, just some black tea. Earl Grey, to be precise. According to the itinerary, noon was to be the scene of an adda session led by Swapan Seth (who also helped Madhu Neotia put together the getaway) in the library. It was meant to be followed by lunch. Lunch? Might faint by then. A cute cookie platter by the window came to the rescue, topped with a hasty resolution to skip lunch.



### GRAMEEN AHAAR

Peasant lunch. The smell of lime, a splattering of *bel* and *genda phool* on the urns on the table, *gamchha*-check upholstery and a beautiful boat floating by on the river. The menu was tied with straw, placed on the *matti* plate and covered with banana leaf. Again, the wedge of lime and green chilli lay on the platter. The rustic feast followed. *Dheki bhanga bhaat* and *ruti*. A bitter start with neem and healthy *saag* (*laal* and *kolmi*) and *boras* — *thankuni pata*, *polta pata*, *bok phool* and *kumro phool*. After cleansing the palate with water infused with a dash of camphor, it was time for the second course. *Kuncho Chingri*, *Musurir Dal*, *Khosar Chorchori* and a beautifully prepared *Kasha Haanser Dimer Jhol*.... Then came *Puti Maach Bhaja* and *Begun Bhaja*. Cap it off with *Khejurer Chutney* and a gleaming, happy, orange bowl of *Mihidana*.

The barge ride on *Pari* was called off because of stormy weather, and the *Jolkhabar* was going to be called off too. But no one goes hungry on the *Gourmet Getaway*! Outside the library, *Russell Street* was recreated, with *moori* and *phuchka*. Inside the library, *Abhijit* delivered a presentation on molecular gastronomy. It began well. He explained how this trend in contemporary cuisine had developed as a meeting between the culinary arts and science. At its core was the technique of combining foods with similar aroma molecules. The next 15-odd minutes were a flashback to chemistry class. Exciting, intriguing and exotic. Edible paper, frying in water, deconstruction of a blackforest pastry and beetroot caviar.

Soon after came two more demos: *Farzana* showed a *Prawn Pulao* and *Rocky* a *Thai Basil Chicken*, street style of course!



### BREAKFAST

Forget lunch, breakfast came first. Will a few cookies ever do when faced with another full south Indian breakfast?

As our bodies busily digested breakfast — and made space for the next meal — the chefs decided it was time to take us behind the scenes. The session began with chef *Abhijit Saha* taking his audience through the paces of *Prawn Ala Ooglio*, with a twist of *curry leaves*. Then *Marut Sikka* demonstrated *Fish Moilee*, *Anglo-Indian style* (less chillies). Finally, *Varun Tuli* showed us how to make *Thai Green Curry* using fresh green curry paste (*basil*, *coriander leaves* and stems, *spring onion*, *kaffir lime leaves*, *galangal* and *green chillies*).



### MUSHALMAANER KHABAAR

So far the food had been special — both in terms of substance and style. But the final meal of *Gourmet Getaway* was something else. Dramatic and utterly decadent. A massive rose bouquet (*Sabya* called it his "rose banyan tree") engulfed the senses as you entered the dining room one last time. The sweetness filled the air as countless rose-scented candles that dotted the room flickered, providing the only source of light (ooh, flattering). Vintage rose prints on the table runner. A long-stemmed rose on each mango-tree motif plate. The staff wore *Sabyasachi* couture *topis* (which appeared in his *Couture Week* show). She served in *muslin Anarkali kurtas*; he in stark white *pyjama-kurta*. The menu placed near the roses on the plates revealed the evening secrets: *Mutton Biryani*, *Chicken Chaamp*, *Mutton Rezala*, *Minceed Meat Kebab* and *Tandoori Roti*. There were matching vegetarian options for each (our hosts *Harsh* and *Madhu Neotia* were the only vegetarians present). *Burhani*, *Rooh Afza* in soda brought to life with a dash of lime and more camphor water occupied the three exquisitely ornate glasses on the table. Dessert? *Firni* and *kulfi*.

The perfect ending to a perfect weekend. Sweet and soulful.