

The French Connection

As Mumbai gets its third French restaurant, Pooja Bhula explores why the cuisine has been slow to pick up in the city and what our handful restaurants has to offer

MUSTARD, WORLI



Lapin a cuillere; (Inset) Quinoa with avocado salad and tomato tartar served at Mustard in Mumbai

The latest French diner (cum lounge) in Mumbai, Mustard, which recently opened up at Atria mall, is dual-cuisined offering separate Bengali and French menus. It doesn't do fusion, the delicacies are authentic. Why bring them under one roof? For their love of the spice. Bengalis

use mustard seeds for tempering, leaves for

saag, which has medicinal purposes, as a

paste: *shorshe bata*, as well as a condiment like the fermented mustard

sauce, *kasundi*. In France, "mustard was originally mixed with *verjus*

(unfermented grape juice/vinegar of wines unsuitable for vignification). Mustard was made every-

where wine was produced. The most famous is from Bourgogne, like Moutarde de Dijon's," shares

Bazire. Mustard offers five home-

made types: *moutarde de campagne* (Di-

jon-like mustard paste with spice aromas), grainy mustard, *vert moutarde* (grainy

mustard with pesto), *rouge moutarde* (rosemary and Kash-

mir chilli) and honey mustard that complements cheese.

You'll find traces in the bar menu as well.

The French fare has dishes from Normandy like baked scallops or *mussel a la Dieppoise*, and Provence, like Pissardi-

diere or Pesto broth. The selection is meant to "satisfy patrons with different exposure to French gastronomy, hence

some are elaborate, others, simple and quick," explains

Bazire. Apart from small plates, their *plats de resistance* are like mains and two dishes - baked salt crusted fish and roast-

ed corn fed chicken and can be shared by the entire table.

But, they must be pre-ordered and are prepared by the *maitre d'hotel*.



About a decade ago, it was 'cool' to study French, as opposed to Hindi in junior college. Alliance Française has been ever popular and in 1993, the then-Bombay University created a separate Department for French. Curiously, generations of *Bombaywalas* have taken to the language, not the French cuisine.

The answer lies in both demand and supply. France hasn't really been on Indian tourist-map and vice versa, leading to limited cultural exchange and exposure. Moreover, restaurateurs believe, acceptance is low because French cuisine has few vegetarian options and sparingly uses spices. "In France, you recognise a chef by the way he shops for grocery. Unlike Indian food that relies heavily on recipes, we rely on ingredients," explains Suzette co-founder Jeremie Sabbagh. "Fresh ones," emphasises Mustard's French chef, Gregory Bazire. Here, Suzette doesn't find enough cheese varieties - versus "at least 350 in Paris" - cold cuts and quality meats like lamb, beef, rabbit, etc and there's "a 200 per cent duty on wine". Besides lamb, Bazire misses quality cream and butter. Slink and Bardot's chef Alexis Gielbaum differs - "The gastronomical cuisine everyone expects of French restaurants is too niche for India right now. Such establishments are very expensive because they mostly rely on imported ingredients - that's a mistake."

Thanks to the macaron rage started by Le 15 and super-charged by La Folie, coupled with tourism and Indian chefs returning with degrees from institutes like Le Cordon Bleu, slowly but steadily things are looking up. Here's trailing our distinctly different French eateries...

SLINK AND BARDOT, WORLI

Concealed in Worli's fishing village, this nightspot is buzzing even on weekdays. The music changes every day and the tempo picks up as the night gets darker. S&B has a private space for big groups, a section of small tables and a lounge area that witnesses feet-tapping week-

ends. The dim lighting, sensual teal and grey walls and simple-yet-artistic interiors complement the chic-yet-unpretentious fare that Gielbaum serves.

He says, "We wanted to break away from clichés about French cuisine - pricey, elaborate courses, rigid protocol, etc. We're trying to make it accessible, so I source ingredients locally rather than importing fancy French ones to keep prices reasonable. Secondly, the menu doesn't follow a starter-mains-dessert concept; we allow for sharing and plates are small so people can try as much as possible." His unconventional menu segregates dishes into nibbles, contemporary, classics, salads, picnic, rustic and desserts. Inspired by Paris

"there's no regional specialisation; you'll get a bit of everything."

Gielbaum met Nick Harrison at Delhi's Le Bistro du Parc that brought him to India four years ago. In time, they decided to start their own place and partnered with restaurateur Riyaz Amlani.

Flavourful and Instagram-worthy, the food remains very French, but in its recent Anniversary Menu, Gielbaum is "opening it up a bit, introducing subtle flavours from around the world like miso, soya, etc., which is common with French restaurants globally".

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The Mont Blanc; (Inset) The duck



When Jeremie Sabbagh, Antonia Achache and Pierre Labail opened this creperie at Nariman Point in 2011, its casual vibe produced by minimalist décor, books, framed French comics and DIY food options broke the fine-dine only image of French eateries. The crepes, made of Brittany's buckwheat flour, were offered out of nostalgia and to "ease the city into French cuisine". Therefore, while sticking to French techniques and ingredients, to cater to a clientele accustomed to variety and vegetables they introduced fillings like "ratatouille and tapenade, traditionally sides eaten with meat dishes. Paris' creperies have simple fillings of ham and cheese, or ham, cheese and bacon/eggs/mushrooms...you'll never see so many veggies," shares Achache. Seven years down, and two more outposts later, crepes remain central to Suzette's menu. "But in the past three-four years we've introduced desserts, croissants and baguettes because well-travelled customers began asking for them." Home-delivery now generates 20-25 per cent revenues, prices have risen and besides high-level executives, Bollywood actors and fitness enthusiasts walk in. "We see more men now and, as health foods are trending, like in France, salad's eaten as a main too," says Sabbagh. "The quality and variety of ingredients have improved a lot, so we source buckwheat locally and are 80 per cent organic," adds Achache. While the menu won't expand further, the footprint will.

Crepe Sunny Side Up Roquette Tomato; (Below) French baguettes at Suzette



Profiteroles (French pastry) served at Suzette

SUZETTE, POWAI, BANDRA AND NARIMAN POINT