

Spicing up Geneva's restaurant scene

With its aromatic spices, complex flavours and fresh ingredients, Indian cuisine has long been seducing the world's palates. Now, thanks to talented and innovative chef, Anupam Banerjee, Geneva's diners have the chance to discover a fresh take on the tastes of the subcontinent at *Rasoi by Vineet*, a temple of "evolved" Indian gastronomy and the only Michelin-starred ethnic restaurant in continental Europe.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | 2008 saw *Rasoi by Vineet* open its doors at the five-star Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Geneva. *Rasoi* means kitchen in Hindi. *Vineet* refers to Vineet Bhatia – the Indian chef who created the original *Rasoi* restaurant in London (also Michelin-starred), and author of a cookbook called *Rasoi New Indian Kitchen* (2009). Vineet Bhatia is the driving force behind the Geneva "signature" establishment, where Anupam Banerjee is head chef.

"Actually, we knew each other at the Oberoi [hotel and culinary institute] in Delhi," Banerjee says, professing his admiration for Bhatia's talent even during their student days. They met up again later in London, when Banerjee was working as sous-chef (assistant chef) at the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park: a hotel well known for its fine Indian and Asian food.

When the Mandarin Group decided to open a Vineet signature restaurant in Geneva, Banerjee was management's choice to head the kitchen. The 33-year-old was excited by the opportunity and enthusiastically accepted. Prior to his departure for Switzerland, he spent time at the *Rasoi* restaurant in the exclusive Chelsea district of London. Here he learnt to cook what Bhatia calls "evolved" Indian cuisine – using ingredients and flavours from the vast repertory of traditional Indian cookery, with all its many regional styles, to create extremely refined, French-influenced Indian haute gastronomy.

Career path

Banerjee was no stranger to rapid career advancement. In 1999, aged 25, having won an Oberoi Group cooking competition, he was sent to Singapore to represent Oberoi in a "Taste of Asia" promotion. As luck would have it, the chef at Raffles Hotel tasted his food and offered him a job.

"During my two years at Raffles I was a stand-in chef, and got to work in many of the hotel's 18 restaurants, including Asian fusion, grill, steakhouse, and the Raffles Courtyard that opened with me and where we served Mediterranean cuisine. I also represented Raffles at a showcase event at l'Ermitage in Beverly Hills, California. All this meant that I was able to work side by side with some of the world's greatest chefs, being exposed to their philosophies of food and what made them tick. It opened up the world for me."

Childhood and student days

Born in 1974, Banerjee grew up with two younger brothers in the town of Ranchi, capital of the state of Jharkhand in eastern India. His mother, a professor of economics at Ranchi University, and his engineer father were, at first, not enchanted by their son's choice of career. "Everybody in my mum's family is a professor, and everybody in my dad's family is an engineer, so the idea of me pursuing cooking was seen as a bit of a step down."

His interest started early. "Somewhere between 12 and 14 years old, I began noticing the food on the table." He says his eagerness to learn about ingredients, recipes and cooking methods was intense and he amassed a great deal of knowledge and skill. "I was curious – and arrogant," he says.

By the time he was 17, his talent had won over his parents, who agreed to let him train at a hotel management school in Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu at the southernmost tip of the Indian sub-continent.

Banerjee says the school expanded his horizons considerably. "Not that we hadn't travelled as a family, because we did – mostly around India," he says. "But during the three-year course, I learned about so many other cooking styles, Indian and otherwise; so many flavours; not to mention techniques," which included a sound foundation in French cookery skills.

When he graduated at age 20, he had been campus-recruited by the Oberoi Hotel Group and headed for Delhi to attend the Oberoi School. "It was part school, part on-the-job training. I was at junior sous-chef level when I got out in 1997. My first job was at the five-star Delhi Oberoi in both the French fine dining restaurant and the brasserie."

Life in Geneva

Banerjee met his Singapore-Chinese wife, Fung, in Singapore, where they worked together at Raffles Hotel. In 2006, they married in London. Their son, Nathan, is now three years old and – according to Banerjee – enjoys life in Geneva, even picking up the local language.

And what about Banerjee himself? "The mountains and lake make Geneva a good place for the outdoor life. I enjoy running, cycling and swimming. The air is purer than it is in London. It's ideal to do 'father stuff' with my son. Driving is better here too,



Anupam Banerjee baking naan in the tandoor oven

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“Declination” of foie gras – pan-fried, yoghurt, and roulade with smoked cashew nut and raisin. A declination means preparing one main ingredient in several ways and serving them together.

safer; people have more respect. Geneva is also an ideal base from which to travel around Europe. We’ve travelled quite a bit around Switzerland already: all the tourist places, like Interlaken and Zermatt – beautiful.”

Describing London as “vibrant, with a lot happening in the food world”, Banerjee calls Geneva “vibrant in a mature way” – but also with a lot going on in the food world. “In Geneva and the area surrounding it, in France, but especially in Switzerland along Lac Léman [Lake Geneva] from Geneva to Montreux, there is an unparalleled concentration of restaurants with one, two and three Michelin stars.”

By contrast, London – a city of over seven million inhabitants – has two Michelin three-star restaurants, eight with two stars, and 40 with one star. The Léman stretch in Switzerland alone is home to the country’s only two three-star establishments (Pont de Brent outside Montreux and Philippe Rochat near Lausanne), as well as four two-star restaurants and almost 20 one-star restaurants.

Banerjee says he particularly enjoys the exchanges with other top chefs in the area. “We all try out each others’ restaurants. When, say, Philippe Rochat comes to eat, you just try and outdo yourself and make sure he gets an all-around picture of what you can do. And then of course he does the same for you when you go to his place.”

Finding the best ingredients

Banerjee says he is impressed with the freshness of the regional produce, and sources all his herbs locally. For spices, he has Lon-

Food review with Chef Banerjee

“Tell me what you hated,” he says as he joins me after the lunch rush dies down. Swift mental review: I’m fully prepared to tell him ... if I can think of something.

Papadums with chutneys: one cooling, one hot and spicy. They were classic, perfect.

A thali (a platter with compartments for small portions of several different dishes): chicken spring roll, cooked in the tandoor oven; fish curry, with coconut and lime; hot minced lamb skewer bright red from the spices; cauliflower florets with a yellow masala mix; rice perfumed with lime and chopped coriander; a cluster of different salad leaves; naan bread. This was not only a splendid visual treat, but on eating, proved to be an incredibly subtle taste tour of the flavours of India. Coriander, lime and coconut are among the essential flavours in Indian cooking, along with ginger and tamarind.

Banerjee had sent out a crab dish for me to try – deep-fried for seconds in a thin layer of batter, like tempura. The crab was creatively presented and, unlike the thali platter, made no references to traditional Indian cuisine. The pieces of bright red, very spicy crab were arranged standing, like miniature sculptures; around them was an even tinier landscape of different kinds of cherry tomato, minuscule, cressy leaves, tiny hillocks of cooling raita (yoghurt with cucumber) and papaya salad. If the arrangement was unexpected, the colours and tastes were pure India.

Never one to resist kulfi (a kind of ice cream), I ordered that for dessert. Banerjee’s mango version, served with edible gold and fresh fruit salad with mint, was the best I’ve ever tasted. It took me a while to figure out that what, at first, looked like artificial (plastic) decorative elements accompanying the kulfi, were in fact white and pistachio coloured chocolate.

Banerjee is very excited about his experiments in chocolate making, even more about my impressions of another dessert he wants me to sample: crème brûlée arranged in five, small, low, leaf-shaped bowls on a tray. Visually magnificent because of their beautiful pink, yellow and green colours, the creams are flavoured with rose petal, mint tea, pistachio, lychee and passion fruit. There is a sharp bite of saffron in the little biscuit accompanying one, and a startling effect when I crunch into a chocolate-dipped dough twist that crackles and pops – to provide some zing to counterbalance the delicate creams, Banerjee says. He bought some crackling candy in a store and put it in the chocolate. “There’s so much going on with this dessert,” he says. “It’s enacting a drama.”

Come to that, so was the whole meal: innovative, fun, quintessentially Indian and yet unlike anything one might expect (and it’s not even the first time I’ve eaten at Rasoi, albeit not these particular dishes). I loved it.

don suppliers who send over whatever he needs. “The most used spice in India, in all the regions, is cumin,” he says. Other major spices include turmeric (curcuma), black and green cardamom, mustard seed and chillies.

He and his eight, all-Indian, male kitchen-staff mix their own curries and masala. “They’ve all been to hotel school, and we complement each other because we all have different knowledge bases as regards Indian regional cooking.” Vineet Bhatia pops over from London perhaps once a month, or every two months, to exchange ideas.

Dishes served in London and Geneva play different variations on the basic theme of Bhatia’s “evolved” style, with some overlaps – for example in the à la carte selections. On their current *Gourmand Menus*, both eateries feature white tomato soup, lobster (however, cooked in different ways) and herb crusted lamb rack with lime lamb samosas and Rogan Josh sauce. Otherwise, the London and Geneva restaurants feature different set-price menus, and are by no means identical. It is Banerjee, after all, who earned the Geneva Michelin-star – and after only one year.



Grilled lobster with broccoli kichdi and spiced jus

Banerjee has two days off from cooking a week – and one thing he doesn't do is spend more time in the kitchen. "At home, my wife does the cooking, and she's great at it."

Front of house

At the restaurant, Banerjee gives guests face time by making occasional front of house appearances in his crisp chef's whites with his name embroidered on the jacket. He is articulate, laid back, has a good sense of humour, and engages easily with people.

The Rasoi décor mixes a minimalist western style with notes of Indian decorative opulence in mother-of-pearl mosaics, exotic swirls of gold in the upholstery of the banquettes, Indian artefacts, and flowers like orchids and anthuriums.

A work by Delhi-based Indian artist, Subodh Gupta, entitled *Cheap Rice* (2006) – featuring a heap of shiny brass rice bowls, piled into a life-size rickshaw – successfully completes the restaurant space, which flows to a glassed-in terrace, complete with ceiling fan.

A glassed-in space at the entrance allows guests to watch bread being baked in a tandoor oven – a traditional cylindrical clay oven, embedded here in an haute-design contemporary surrounding.

The resulting sophistication of the restaurant is only heightened by *maitre d'* Cyril Marcillon's smooth manner and equally polished staff, and the number of languages heard. The restaurant was full on my visit, creating a nice buzz. This was perhaps also due to the prices: there is a 42-franc (excluding drinks) business lunch option, which is not unreasonable.

As we wind up the interview, I ask Banerjee what his parents – initially reluctant to let him go the chef route – make of all this. "Very proud," he says with that engaging grin.



For dessert, a declination of fruits



The Maharajah of Jodhpur (centre), a Rasoi guest, with Banerjee and Vineet Bhatia (right). Brass pots from the artwork by Subodh Gupta shine in the background.

Experience it for yourself

Learn more at www.rasoi.ch, or (in English) at www.mandarinoriental.com/geneva/dining/rasoi.

Cooking classes with Anupam Banerjee:

September 25: Fish & Seafood

October 30: Curries

November 27: Festive Tapas