



Tastes of the Taj



Great restaurants and the renowned chefs behind them are part of the sumptuous Taj experience. Food and wine writer *Antoine Lewis* serves up five of the best that the Taj group has, with a sampling of their signature dishes and the opulent ambience in which they are laid out

THAI PAVILION

VIVANTA BY TAJ-PRESIDENT, MUMBAI



Until 1993, when the Thai Pavilion opened at Vivanta by Taj-President (then called The President), Mumbai had not experienced the sour-spiciness of a Tom Yum Soup, the crunchiness of a Som Tam Salad or the piquant punch of a velvety smooth Thai Green Curry. As the city's first and most successful Thai restaurant, the Thai Pavilion inspired a wave of Thai restaurants, firmly establishing, in the process, a new lexicon of dishes and a new palate for flavours.

In 2006, along with the rest of the hotel, the Thai Pavilion underwent a renovation, transforming it into a stylish, contemporary-looking restaurant. The culinary spectacle was brought centre stage, with an open-display kitchen dominating the L-shaped restaurant. Diners who favour a more interactive experience can now choose one of the seats arranged around this open kitchen.

A series of wine cabinets at the entrance separates the semi-private dining section from the hubbub of the main dining area. For guests who want a more traditional experience,

the sunken round table at the far end of the restaurant is perfect. While one wall is made of scrap wood carved with Thai motifs, another is a fretwork of traditional Thai craft.

Along with the interiors the entire menu was overhauled. Though some old favourites have been retained, Chef Ananda Solomon's new menu is reflective of the contemporary influences on Thai cuisine. The style of cooking and the ingredients have not changed, but the Pavilion's cooking techniques have been modernised. For instance, the basic sauces are now cooked on a slow fire so that the meat is merely coated, and herbs are chosen based on what meats they will be used to flavour.

The presentation is also quite modern: elaborate garnishes and carvings have been dispensed with and everything on the plate is edible. One of the most popular dishes on the menu, the Thai-style duck liver foie gras with sea asparagus in mango sauce — which combines a traditional French ingredient with Thai flavours and bold splashes of colour — typifies the new spirit of the place.

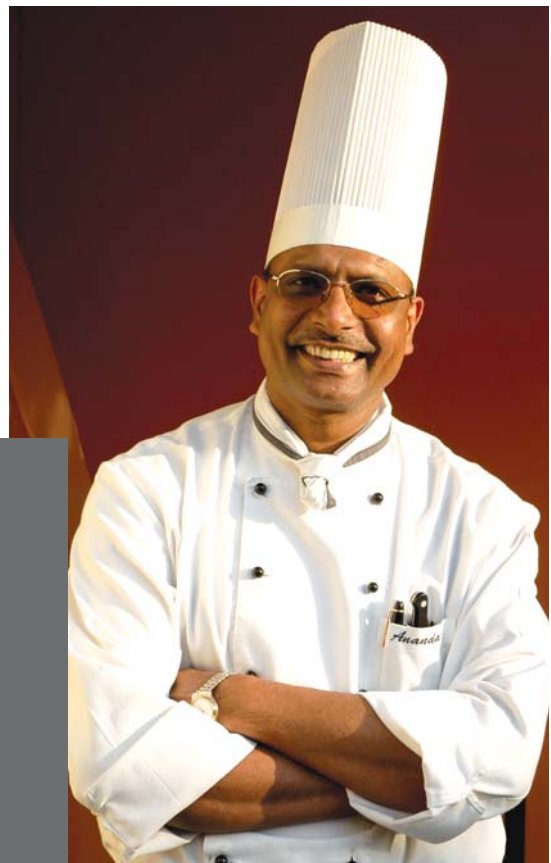


Signature dish

For the Thai Pavilion, the classic remains its prawns in green curry. What makes this dish so unique is that, unlike in most restaurants, two of the most important and time-consuming elements — the coconut milk and the green curry paste — are made fresh. While the green curry is the signature dish, Chef Solomon suggests that diners order a pomelo salad, crispy fish, steamed rice and morning glory as well if they want to enjoy their meal in traditional Thai style.

The chef

Ananda Solomon, the man who can take credit for the success of the Pavilion, spent months studying and travelling through Thailand before the opening of the restaurant. He ate his way through different regions of the country, tasting the food prepared in Thai homes as well as street-food stalls and expensive restaurants. He is probably the only non-Thai chef in the world to have worked and trained in the royal kitchens of the country.



KARAVALLI

THE GATEWAY HOTEL, BENGALURU



One of the best-known restaurants in the city, Karavalli is an unexpected oasis of tranquillity in the heart of Bengaluru's commercial district. It is just a stone's throw from the congested and gleaming thoroughfare that is Residency Road, but this restaurant still manages to evoke an older, quieter, more relaxed Bengaluru.

Inspired by a traditional Mangalorean house, Karavalli has a rustic air about it. A pebble-stoned passageway leads into a brightly-lit, thatch-covered, courtyard-like main dining area. The pale lemon walls, dark wood chairs and polished tables, and traditional artefacts make you feel you have entered a home rather than a restaurant. Outside, in the garden, are tables for those who prefer alfresco dining, while an enclosed room offers a different set of comforts.

Not only does Karavalli look exactly as it did 21 years ago, when it opened, it has managed the rare feat of serving almost the same menu all through while maintaining consistently high standards.

At Karavalli —which means 'land by the shore' in Kannada and Tulu — the effort is to

recreate traditional dishes from the cuisines of Mangalore, Goa and Kerala. The emphasis is on home-style cooking and the aim is to prepare dishes that make the guests feel that someone's mother or grandmother has cooked the food.

The restaurant has managed to achieve this by carefully picking its cooks (and all the important ingredients) from the regions themselves. The palm vinegar for the *balchao* and *sorpotel* come from Goa; all the coconuts come from Kundapur in Mangalore; *kudampuli*, a souring agent in Keralite fish curry, comes from Kerala, as does the *ada* (flakes of rice pancake) for the *ada pradhaman* (a rice-based dessert). Additionally, most of the recipes have come from housewives who also imparted additional training to the cooks. That the majority of the kitchen team has been at Karavalli from the time the restaurant opened has helped ensure a consistent quality.

With a number of stellar contenders on the menu — like kori gassi, Coorg fried chicken, Alleppey fish curry, *pachakkari stew* and *avial* — it might seem a bit difficult to choose one dish that qualifies as a standout, but that makes Karavalli all the more alluring.



Signature dish

It has to be the tiger prawn Malabar style, the first among equals at Karavalli. Though the preparation of tiger prawns sautéed in a peppery masala is quite simple, the combination of fresh-flavoured spices and the distinctive taste of the prawns makes this dish perfectly delicious. Served as a starter, it is best eaten by itself or with plump, freshly-made *appams*.



The chef

Naren Thimmiah, who has been the face of the restaurant for over a decade, started his culinary career in the Karavalli kitchen. Hailing from Coorg, Chef Thimmiah has travelled extensively through the south of India and is intimately familiar with the region's ingredients and different styles of cooking. When competitors began to copy Karavalli's menu, he introduced lesser-known food from Managalore's Konkani kitchens and from the Syrian Christian heartland of Kerala.

WASABI BY MORIMOTO

THE TAJ MAHAL PALACE, MUMBAI



Recognised as one of the top 100 restaurants in the world, Wasabi By Morimoto at The Taj Mahal Palace is not only India's best Japanese restaurant but is probably one of the best restaurants in India.

It was always meant to be so. From the moment Chef Hemant Oberoi felt Mumbai was ready for Japanese food he was clear he would create a world-class restaurant. He knew that his clientele was already familiar with Japanese food and were regulars at top-end Japanese restaurants such as Nobu in New York and Zuma in London.

Under the guidance of Masaharu Morimoto, who had helped set up Nobu and was successfully running his own restaurant in Philadelphia, Wasabi By Morimoto was launched, not as a traditional Japanese restaurant but as one that offered modern Japanese food.

With two chefs from Morimoto and an Indian team that had trained at Morimoto and in Japan, where they learned traditional techniques and familiarised themselves with

local ingredients, Wasabi opened in 2004 to critical and commercial acclaim. It remains the only restaurant in India to serve freshly grated wasabi.

Wasabi's unique feature is the strength of its vegetarian menu, created entirely by Chef Oberoi. It is probably the only Japanese restaurant in the world that offers vegetarians so much choice. The tomato carpaccio with yuzu and soy dressing, topped with a wasabi and yuzu sorbet, is outstanding.

Unfortunately, it bore the brunt of the terrorist attack on the Taj in 2008 and was completely destroyed. It re-opened in 2010 with a new look. The spiral staircase has been replaced with a bright red lacquer stairway and a glass-walled lift. Upstairs, the pale green walls and dark, mood lighting has given way to a bright and cheerful room.

The best tables are the ones alongside the windows overlooking the Gateway of India, with bar seating available at the sushi and teppanyaki counters. In one discreet corner is a semi-private dining table in the shape of a giant silver ball.



Signature dish

The black cod miso is clearly the winner, with the cod flown straight from Tokyo's famous Tsukiji Market twice a week. To achieve the mellow sweet-salt balance and delicately firm texture, the cod is marinated in salt for 24 hours, followed by miso for a further 24 hours. It is then broiled under salamander for 35 minutes and finally baked in an oven for seven minutes. It is served with translucent, paper-thin slices of pickled red pepper and sweetened Japanese kuromame beans.



The chef

Wasabi would not have been possible but for the experience and expertise that Chef Hemant Oberoi brings to the table. Credited with having introduced various niche cuisines to the Indian palate, Chef Oberoi can most often be found in his private, hi-tech 'chef studio' hosting small dinner parties for visiting dignitaries and celebrities. When not in his studio, he could well be accompanying the prime minister on his tours or catering to A-list weddings and events around the world.

THE QUILON

51 BUCKINGHAM GATE, TAJ SUITES AND RESIDENCES, LONDON



The first South Indian restaurant to win a Michelin star, The Quilon was also the first Indian restaurant in the UK to break away from serving stereotypical North Indian fare. At a time when Indian restaurants didn't go beyond Punjabi and Mughlai recipes, The Quilon, which opened in 1993, took a bold plunge into the world of south-west Indian coastal cuisine. Focusing on food from Mangalore, Goa and Kerala and under the guidance Chef Sriram Aylur, it offers an inventive array of traditional, home-style preparations tempered with a few modern Indian dishes.

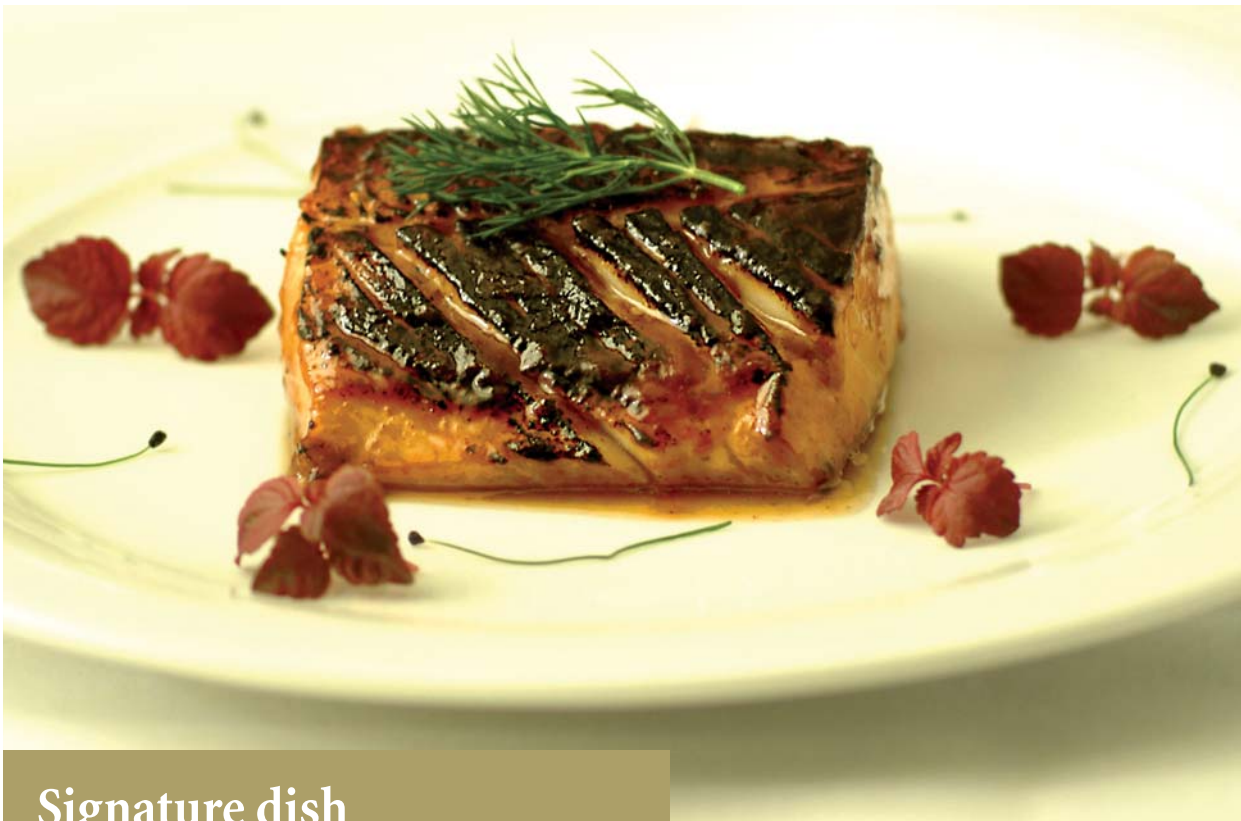
Using Karavalli — which was opened by Chef Aylur — as inspiration and model, the dishes at The Quilon evolved a style suited to an international palate. The food, explains the chef, is rooted in the styles and flavours of the region it hails from. The cuts of meats, the use of the best local produce and contemporary presentation give the food a modern edge.

To ensure the authenticity of its flavours, The Quilon imports almost all of its spices, making it the largest importer of spices by variety among Indian restaurants in Britain.

Believing that even basic flavourings like peppercorns can make a difference, The Quilon uses only Malabar pepper; the *balchao* is made with Goan vinegar; the Mangalorean chicken curry with *byadgi* chilli and the *dodol* with Goan palm jaggery. The attention to detail and the determination to recreate true flavours has paid dividends in the form of a Michelin star.

Success, however, didn't come immediately. British diners, expecting another Indian curry house serving chicken tikka masala and naan, were surprised and confused by the new food. It took a few years of educating guests, tweaking the presentation and using familiar meats and fish before guests began to connect with the flavours and food. Today The Quilon is definitively on the culinary map of London and its clientele includes business barons and Hollywood stars.

Chef Aylur has handpicked wines and beers that complement the contrasting flavours and subtle textures that are the feature of the food at The Quilon. In May this year, he took the concept one step ahead by making The Quilon the first restaurant in Britain to introduce vintage English beers.



Signature dish

The Japanese cult classic black cod miso has been reimagined and transformed into the signature black cod *vattichattu*. A fine example of modern, progressive cooking, the locally-sourced cod is combined with traditional flavourings and cooked by way of a combination of Western and Indian techniques. The end result: a beautifully tender fillet of fish with expressive Indian tastes but visually very international.



The chef

Sriram Aylur joined the Taj group in 1989 and rapidly rose through the ranks to become executive chef of the Gateway Hotel in Bengaluru. Acknowledged as one of the top chefs in India, he was handpicked to head The Quilon after the spectacular success of Karavalli. His culinary philosophy — combining the best ingredients to achieve the highest standard in modern Indian cuisine — has earned him numerous accolades. He is widely reckoned to be one of the top Indian chefs in England.

PREGO

THE TAJ COROMANDEL, CHENNAI



Finding an informal Italian restaurant in any Indian city is a breeze. In some of the more cosmopolitan metros and tourist areas, you'll find a decent selection of fine-dining Italian restaurants. But an Italian fine-dining restaurant that doesn't include pizza on the menu is a rarity. To discover a restaurant of this calibre in Chennai — not a city associated with cutting-edge, trendy restaurants — is nothing short of astonishing.

Launched in 2009, Prego at the Taj Coromandel is India's first and only fine-dining Italian restaurant exclusively offering Italian haute cuisine. Conceived four years ago by Chef Hemant Oberoi when the hotel was being renovated, Prego is a restaurant that's truly ahead of its times, not just in Chennai but in India.

Located at the lower lobby level, the restaurant is decorated in a warm and contemporary style, with elegant white linens, sparkling lead-crystal glassware and silver cutlery. When paired with earth-toned upholstery and gorgeous flooring, the result is chic and formal, but not overbearing.

Twilight transforms Prego into a refined dinner venue with music and subdued lighting.

While the section overlooking the pool and lawns at the far end of the restaurant is perfect for a sunny Sunday afternoon brunch or a more private meal in the evening, the open kitchen creates an interactive space in the central dining area. The highlight is the temperature-controlled Enoteca. Considered to be among the best wine libraries in India, with 75 wines from Italy alone, guests can browse through the collection, or taste from the different wines set out every day, before making a selection.

After travelling through the length and breadth of Italy and visiting a clutch of Michelin-starred restaurants, it was decided that the menu would be a blend of classical and contemporary. The flavours, insists Chef Giovanna Marson, who heads the kitchen, are pure Italian even though the presentation is international.

The *I gamberoni con l'avocado, le fragole e gli agrumi* — perfectly grilled king prawns arranged on a long white plate decorated with avocado and strawberry coulis — is as beautiful as it is tasty. Top quality olive oil and 15-year-old balsamic vinegar is served at the table, only the best artisanal meats are selected for the cold meats and most of the pastas are handmade.



Signature dish

Prego's piece de resistance is the *Il risotto alla Milanese*, a Milanese-style saffron risotto with gold leaf. Served on a black plate, the creamy golden-orange risotto, flecked with streaks of saffron, is garnished with a sliver of gold leaf-coated parmesan.

The chef

Giovanna Marson, with her strong roots in traditional Italian cooking, passion for experimentation and Japanese-influenced visual aesthetic, is the perfect chef for this standout restaurant. One of the few lady chefs known across Italy, she has worked at many well-known, Michelin-starred Italian restaurants. While there is no compromise on the authenticity of tastes and flavours at Prego, her style of cooking is distinguishable by its delicateness and emphasis on creativity and freshness.

