

Why Indian chefs are adopting to a 'farm-to-table' approach

The culinary landscape of India is slowly changing as chefs strive for purer, fresher flavours and embrace the 'farm-to-table' concept, says Fareeda Kanga

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I am out shopping for dinner... but instead of a trolley and credit card, I am holding a fishing rod and net! The azure blue seas of the Indian Ocean in the Maldives is my playground for a culinary feast of the freshest seafood ever imaginable. I salivate over the freshest and firmest catch of the day from tuna, red snapper to Green job fish and juicy prawns. While the journey from net to table is minimised because of our geographical location in a setting like the Maldives -- it's heartening to know that in big cities around the world, including Mumbai, the farm-to-table concept is being embraced wholeheartedly.



A mixed bed of carrots and radish farmed by the Grand Hyatt in Goa. PIC courtesy/ Grand Hyatt Goa

Freshness defined

Simply decoded, this food trend lobbies for fresh ingredients and purer tastes with a disconnect from processed foods and flavours. The movement towards farm-to-table at its core is the concept of connecting communities to local farmers in an effort to make rich-in-quality ingredients more accessible. This growing trend is seen as an excellent way to support one's local community too. After my tryst with fresh flavours and tastes in the Maldives, I was curious to see whether our local chefs had also embraced this concept. Happily, many of them indeed had.



Seasonal Grilled Vegetables with Garlic, Chili Oil and Rocket Leaves served at 212 restaurant in Worli

As early adopters of the farm-to-table philosophy, the kitchens of Four Seasons Hotel, Mumbai do not go far to source food. "Importing international quality produce is a challenge in Mumbai and we have acquired the use of a farmland, just four hours drive from the city. It gives us an opportunity to be involved in the process of farm-to-table from start to finish," says Executive Chef Oscar Gonzalez. This fertile land is ploughed regularly for a majority of seasonal vegetables to maximise the produce. This crop rotation concept helps in quality control, provides accessibility to key ingredients but also supports sustainable farming. It ensures that the ingredients are fresh, retain their natural flavours and are healthy to consume. Gonzalez explains, "While these benefits have a direct relation to how great the food can taste at our restaurants, it also makes us conscious about our carbon footprint. Who doesn't want to have a better tomorrow?"

A historical journey

Perhaps one of the pioneers of the farm-to-table concept was an American culinary legend, Alice Waters whose iconic restaurant Chez Panisse is one of the modern forerunners of this concept. Her story bears a mention in connection to this trend. Eating out in the Rs 70s in California meant burgers and fries. Then a young Alice Waters returned from a trip to France in 1971 and changed all that. Mesmerised by the use of fresh produce, simple ingredients and bold flavours in French cooking she opened Chez Panisse in Berkeley, inadvertently creating a new style of cooking California Cuisine. The emphasis of this cuisine is on the use of fresh, local ingredients, which are often, acquired daily at farmers markets. Menus are changed to accommodate the availability of seasonal ingredients.



Organic veggies being grown at the Pinto farm in Goa

There are many clones of this iconic restaurant including the wildly-popular Zuni Cafe at Market Street known for its divine Caesar Salad, famed roast chicken and gnocchi oozing with the softest ricotta cheese ever. Closer home in Mumbai's tony Colaba district, at Ellipsis, Executive Chef Kelvin Cheung is the first to bring this into practice in the city, with a menu, which changes every day.

"We are truly dedicated to educating our customers on quality ingredients, so leading with a farm-to-table concept seemed like a natural progression," says Rohan Talwar, CEO of IB Hospitality, the parent company of Ellipsis. "It has not been an easy initiative and in order to maintain our high standards, Chef Cheung works with local farmers to teach them about picking and packaging their produce."



Freshly-picked lettuce is used by five-star hotels for salads

According to Cheung, local ingredients are not as plentiful as he'd like and changing the menu gives him the flexibility to serve veggies that literally squeak of freshness is 212's Sous Chef Mohammed Bhol. Even a simple dish of seasonal grilled vegetables gets elevated to a gourmet delight thanks to his precise and manic sourcing of the best ingredients.

A stone's throw away at The Table, the produce is grown at the owner's Jay Yousuf and Gauri Devidayal's (the owners of the Table) farm in Alibaug. "The long-term goal of The Table Farm is to provide us with as much seasonal produce as possible, over about an acre of land. Currently the farm grows spinach, beetroot, radish, carrots, mizuna and other leafy greens, heirloom varieties of tomatoes, herbs and several different micro greens. In the future we would like to invite restaurant patrons to the farm to learn more about natural food growing methods and participate in this farm-to-table experience," says Executive Chef Alex Sanchez.



Fresh cardamom produce from Malabar House's Kitchen. PIC courtesy/ malabar house

Another Mumbai chef who goes to great lengths to serve veggies that literally squeak of freshness is 212's Sous Chef Mohammed Bhol. Even a simple dish of seasonal grilled vegetables gets elevated to a gourmet delight thanks to his precise and manic sourcing of the best ingredients.

Many hotels such as the ITC Grand Central, Parel, take the concept of 'Responsible Luxury' very seriously. Hence the farm-to-table concept fits well into their corporate ethos. Chefs at this hotel are building relationships with local farmers and producers and changing their purchasing habits, supporting the local food economy and the sun system. "We also produce at certain times homegrown sprouts such as flax, sunflower, pumpkin, mustard and fenugreek etc, grown in soil free tubs. This approach of eco-responsibility is in the interest of reducing carbon foot prints, reducing food miles, increasing sustainability and improving eco consciousness," says a spokesperson for the hotel.



Meen Pollichathum -- Fresh Pearl fish, steamed in banana leaves, served at Malabar House

I'm pleasantly surprised to find properties not just in Mumbai but in smaller metros such as Kochi too being farm-to-table fans. For breakfast at The Malabar House, Kochi, a boutique hotel, Chef Manoj Nair dishes up scrambled eggs with prawns and red peppers fresh using organic farm eggs from Kodaknath hens. Tiger prawns coated in crispy noodles or cuttle fish sticks are savoured as the seafood comes daily from local fishermen.

"Freshness is the soul of the kitchen and the team realises that. From jams and marmalades for breakfast to pickles and preserves for our lunch-time Thali to our homemade ice creams and sorbets, all are prepared in-house from the basic produce. Our creative cooking is based on the availability of fresh products and the emphasis on local produce is very visible in our menu.

We change the menu with the seasons, therefore we use a larger variety of materials and have never to compromise on the availability of the finest quality. It's paramount that we realise the importance of fresh and less travelled food and re-emphasises the roots of our food habits. This has not only an impact on local small businesses but helps also to build up of a responsible health consciousness," says chef Nair.

My final stop on this culinary adventure is at the Grand Hyatt Goa, which receives organically grown fresh farm produce for all the dishes made at their seven foods and beverage outlets from a small store in Talegaon called Green Essentials. The hotel's Executive Chef has travelled across the state of Goa to search for organically grown, fresh farm produce.

Here, the kitchen team makes sure they visit the local vegetable fields in Talegaon regularly to ensure that standard and quality is maintained. To make the soil more fertile, segregated kitchen waste for composting is supplied by the hotel. The collaborative effort not only supports the local community but also aids in reusing waste as well as reduction of the our carbon footprints.

Traditionally as Indians we have always insisted on home cooked fresh meals. To keep up with the fast moving world, we recently slipped into adapting pre-cooked industrial food. Unfortunately many restaurants utilise this as cost effective sales tool. However it's lovely to see (and taste) the revival of that which is pure, fresh and free of chemicals finding its way to our tables and stomachs for a healthier lifestyle and friendlier earth.