



(Left to right) Sameer Seth, Floyd Cardoz and Yash Bhanage

# The tastemakers

Food is about people, relationships and memories, believe the three partners behind trend-setting Mumbai restaurants, The Bombay Canteen and O Pedro. **Avantika Bhuyan** on the people behind the food

In December 2016, Sameer Seth, Yash Bhanage and Floyd Cardoz had a meeting. The founders of Hunger Inc had already tasted success with their first eatery, The Bombay Canteen, or TBC. It was time for another, one which would take people to their happy place. A year later, O Pedro opened doors in Mumbai's Bandra-Kurla Complex, a life-size tribute to Goa, with its relaxed vibe, bustling markets and gorgeous homes.

When I walked into O Pedro last year, what struck me was the engagement of the entire staff — from those managing the floor to the mixologists. And that is because *all* of them, right down to the design and graphics people, were part of the making, travelling on *rece* through the state.

Indeed, both Seth and Bhanage emphasise that Hunger Inc is not about any one individual. It is about the architects, designers, home cooks, who chose to join their journey. "It's not a result of a single idea. It's a collective expression of all these people who came along for the ride and allowed us to connect with more people, and make more memories," Seth had said in an INKtalks in December 2016.

At the heart of this venture lies a dream, which fuelled both Bhanage and Seth from when they were students of hospitality management at Cornell University, New York. They wanted to start a restaurant that celebrated the memories, nostalgia and relationships underlying food. But their career paths took them to different cities. Seth worked with the famed Boulud in New York, and helped open three restaurants along the way, while Bhanage's work took him to Chicago, Mumbai and Singapore.

But they hadn't forgotten their dream. Seth ended up calling Bhanage, by then a close friend. Together, they laid the foundations of a restaurant that would not just spin a narrative about regional flavours

and hyperlocal produce but also about the people behind it — home chefs, street-side stall owners, local communities and small producers. Seth then approached Chef Floyd Cardoz, with whom he had opened the North End Grill in New York.

Around 2012, Cardoz, who had worked with Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group for 17 years — opening restaurants such as Tabla, while pioneering the concept of modern Indian food in the US — had decided to take some time off. He wanted to do something with Indian flavours back home and was looking for the right group of people to work with. The conversation with Seth came at just the right time. And that's how Hunger Inc was born, with new members such as Chef Thomas Zacharias joining in.

Today, their different sensibilities shape the ethos of the company. "We respect each other's strengths," says Cardoz. "For instance, I have good flavour recognition. Yash is a great logistics guy and Sam has great ideas." Seth is the cool-headed, patient one, a great conversationalist and a people's person. Bhanage is the creative spirit and is usually hands-on at both restaurants — setting tables, taking reservations, shaking up a cocktail. Sometimes, you can see him don a bright yellow shirt, in true *Bambaiya* style, and do a jig to announce a Canteen Cocktail Party on social media.

Mentorship is taken seriously here. A lot of it has to do with their own journeys. As Bhanage said in his 2017 TEDx talk, everyone has inspirations. For him, they were Steve Jobs and Sir Alex Ferguson. "These inspirations help us dream," he said. But it is the mentors who help realise this dream: Bhanage's father instilled qualities of discipline and punctuality in his son. One of his team leaders, Daniel Jacob, at an Italian restaurant in Mumbai gave him the busiest

shifts so he could learn the most. And his head, Nigel Moore in Singapore, moved him from a jazz club, once it closed, to a poolside space so he could engage with guests and build confidence.

Each of the three partners believes that people grow not just because of innate talent, but because of the effort taken to invest in them. "How do you get the team to talk to guests as equals, to have a conversation? Only then will a guest go back feeling cared for. He or she doesn't need ingredients explained," says Seth. Zacharias concurs: "This has been the ethos of the company from the beginning — build strong individuals by giving constant feedback and having a two-way conversation."

The hiring mandate is not restricted to people from within the industry. Some 30 to 40 per cent of the team comprises career-changers. "We hire them for the right attitude, character and passion. Skills can always be taught. When you get people from other industries, they bring in a different perspective," says Bhanage. Thus, a shy ad film producer is now general manager at The Bombay Canteen and devises training programmes to mentor others. A criminal psychology major was mentored by Zacharias on how to work in a professional kitchen.

That is carried forward with their Canteen Class. Here, students and aspiring chefs/restaurateurs are invited on a Saturday, between 4 pm and 7 pm, to engage with professionals on various aspects of the business: beer brewing, pastry making, coffee tasting, and more.

The other component is to provide a platform to home chefs. "Today, you can build a career working from home. There is so much attention on regional cuisine, and it is only apt that you collaborate with experts who understand those nuances," says Zacharias. So far, TBC has presented

Assamese Rongali Bihu with Gitika Saikia, a Parsi New Year feast with the Bawi Bride Kitchen and a Canteen Karnataka Menu with the Bengaluru Oota Company, celebrating dishes from Mangalorean and Gowda cuisines. Their fifth regional collaboration, Canteen Bengali Bhoj, ended last month, when Kolkata-based home chef Iti Misra took guests on a journey through unexplored flavours such as *muitha dalna*, *horogouri* and the Goalondo Steamer Chicken. "Such events are useful in doing away with the term 'Indian food' because there is really no such thing. There is Bengali cuisine, Assamese, Parsi, and so on. Such pop-ups help establish their unique identity to a larger audience," says Misra.

The team's adventurous approach to regional food has caught the attention of international chefs. This year, TBC was the first Indian eatery to be invited by the Michelin-starred Cheek by Jowl, in Singapore, for a pop-up. "Chef Rishi Naleendra, who helms the eatery, has very similar sensibilities. He does only two pop-ups a year, and it's quite amazing to be invited for one of these," says Zacharias, who showcased signatures such as the Barley and Jowar Salad, Duck Curry, Gulab Nut and Chettinad Prawn Aglio Olio. The positive response has helped the team get more offers to do pop-ups internationally.

Doesn't this prompt Hunger Inc to expand to other cities? "Yes, we are ambitious, but are in no hurry. Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru are three very different demographics, with their own set of logistical challenges. Our moment comes from the fact that we have grown from strength to strength, having retained nine out of 10 members of the original management team," says Seth. Cardoz concurs, "We have evolved organically. When you have to figure out what to do next, that means it's not right."