

rude food



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Eat Well And Always Be Happy!

I am getting so fed up of molecular chefs and Noma interns who take the fun out of restaurants

Why do people go to restaurants? For the food obviously. But what else? Ambience? Michelin-star snobbery?

All of those things, to varying degrees, I would imagine. And they are valid and rational reasons to go out. Norbert Kostner, who was for many years the Executive Chef of Bangkok's Mandarin Oriental hotel in its glory days used to tell his staff, "nobody comes here only for nutrition. They come for the experience. You must make the meal seem special".

These days, alas, we are encouraged to treat restaurant-eating as an act of worship. All too often, you see the phrase "temple of gastronomy" in restaurant publicity. And at many multiple Michelin-starred restaurants, there is a kind of hush that surrounds the place, as though diners have been afforded the unique privilege of partaking of the work of a genius chef.

At other places, chefs engage in what I call the look-what-a-clever-boy-I-am school of cooking. This takes two forms, both perversions of the work of two genuinely talented and influential chefs.

When Ferran Adria started the molecular gastronomy revolution two decades ago, he introduced new elements to modern cuisine. One was science. Adria used chemicals and techniques to enhance flavours and play with form. But he also introduced humour. Many of his great dishes were not just triumphs of technique, they were also witty.

The famous El Bulli olive is one instance. It looked like an olive but when you put it in your mouth, it exploded into the most olivey liquid essence of olive. Adria had used science to take olive juices and construct a virtual olive. While it was a technological marvel, it was also a kind of joke. You giggled foolishly when you realised that you had been tricked: it wasn't a real olive at all.

While Adria's legacies are substantial and empowering, he is also responsible for the thousands of talentless chefs who now turn everything into spheres, sprinkle "soil" (some freeze-dried ingredient) on their plates, put a foam on top of every dish and envelop their food in smoke.

When Adria did it, the food was tasty. Now, nobody cares about taste. You are just supposed to take photos or videos of the dish and put them on Instagram. And the chefs prance around, with smug looks on their faces, encouraging you to tell them how clever they have been.

It is all rather like a magic show staged by 10th standard students who have watched too much Penn & Teller on YouTube.

HAPPY HIGH
O Pedro is a cheerful, happy restaurant, hidden beneath one of the glass towers in BKC, Mumbai



Photo: SANJAY RAMCHANDRAN

The second school of the oh-what-a-clever-boy-am-I cuisine is the legacy of Rene Redzepi of Noma. Redzepi is one of the great chefs of this century and he has made us look again at the ingredients that go into our food. A couple of years ago when he did a celebrated pop-up in Australia, he transformed local ingredients. Abalone, a seafood delicacy that is popular mostly in East Asia, was turned into a Schnitzel (a breaded cutlet). Delicate snow crab meat was flavoured with juices that came from fermenting kangaroo meat. (Think of an Australian version of Thai fish sauce.)

Noma is small and almost impossible to book so hardly anyone has eaten there. But Redzepi's influence on other chefs has been enormous, at least partly because his kitchen accepts so many stagiers. A 'stage' is a kitchen term for a short unpaid internship and Noma has allowed hundreds of chefs from all over the world to do short stages there.

Nine times out of 10, when a chef tells you he worked at Noma, he will not have been a member of the kitchen brigade but will have done a short stage. In fact, I sometimes wonder if more people have done stages at Noma than have actually eaten there.

Redzepi's legacy has been perverted over the years by chefs who cook strange, joyless food, brag about their ingredients and their foraging and force you to eat their tasting menus. None of the stagiers have anything like Redzepi's talent so you usually get rubbish food at ridiculously high prices served in solemn surroundings by halfwits who take themselves too seriously, fawned over by dimwit 'critics' who don't really understand the food but believe, because the Noma name is thrown around, that they have to pretend to enjoy it.

MAKEOVER MAGIC
Local ingredients were transformed by Rene Redzepi of Noma when he did a pop-up in Australia



Photo: VINCENT LONG

Aaj Kya Khaoge?