



FOOD THEORY

*Twice Michelin starred chef Atul Kochhar on having an ego,
food memories and the sanctity of ingredients...*

WORDS **SUDHA MENON**

I AM AT THE RITZ-CARLTON BANGALORE'S CHIC lobby lounge, sipping tea as I wait for Atul Kochhar, the twice Michelin starred chef-owner of London's most celebrated contemporary Indian restaurant, Benares.

Atul made the United Kingdom his home a couple of decades ago but that has not stopped him from conquering palates across the world, including the high seas — he has multiple restaurants on luxury cruise liners too — with the sheer genius of his craft. With my connection to the kitchen limited to the rare Kerala meal that I cook for my husband, was I being audacious in wanting to interview a man who is one of the masters of the culinary world?

I am contemplating fleeing the scene when he walks in, black and white chef's apron folded neatly in one hand. The first thing you notice about him is his easy charm and his complete humility. "Hi, I'm Atul!" he says and you know instantly that both the welcoming smile and handshake are genuine. No airs, no bells and whistles and none of the swagger that some celebrity chefs carry around them these days. Over tea — he has green tea and I have masala chai, he tells me that he has only just returned from lunch with Bangalore's blue-eyed chef, Abhijit Saha, and he is a happy because he has had a great meal and also learnt a couple of things from observing Saha at work.

It takes a very humble man to admit that he constantly learns by observing his peers, many of who do not even know the role they have played in his culinary journey. "If I like a flavour in a restaurant or if I am dining with a chef I admire, I ask questions and jot things down in my diary so that I can use it when there is an opportunity. I have no ego issues about it. In fact, there is no time or space in my life for ego; it twists you up and is an unnecessary thing."

The affable chef's journey of learning began by watching his father run his small catering outfit in Jamshedpur where the family lived. He also learnt from watching his mother and four sisters, all excellent cooks, rustling up delicious meals in the kitchen. Not wanting to be left behind, the young boy took to the kitchen like fish to water.

Later, when he joined the Oberoi group of hotels after his diploma in hospitality management from the Indian Institute of Management, Chennai, he quickly picked up skills by watching the group's celebrated chefs at work. On his very first day at the Oberoi school, the group's veteran trainer, Arun Agarwal, had a piece of advice for the new recruits. "You are here to learn about ingredients and not about cuisine. Learn as much as you can about ingredients and the food will come through easily." A quarter of a century later, the young man who listened to Agarwal with awe and admiration has made that his career mantra. "I have learnt that the more ingredients I know, the richer my culinary skills become."

Which is why he is a constant traveller who trawls markets and restaurants wherever in the world he goes, searching for that new ingredient he can use to create magic. The quest for knowledge and for newer ingredients to introduce in his trend-setting restaurants is rendered easier by his school-going son and daughter who do all the online research for their super chef father and give him detailed notes that he consumes greedily. "My appetite for learning is insatiable. I go crazy when I find a new ingredient that I can work with."

Kochhar's signature style at Benares, which has made its mark with modern Indian food, has consistently been the innovative use of English ingredients to make traditional Indian dishes. Gourmets at Riwaz, Ritz-Carlton Bangalore where he recently hosted a pop-up of Benares got a tasting of the Benares menu; pan seared scallops with

jhajal muri, grape and ginger dressing, chargrilled Scottish salmon with coconut and curry leaf sauce and a divine dessert of rhubarb bhapa doi, all of them delightful combinations made out of his early memories of the food at Jamshedpur, cleverly woven into his familiarity with the freshest produce from England.

Ask him what the really important things are for him and he will tell you simply that it is to lead a healthy life, be close to his family, be a good leader and teacher and to make a difference in the life of the talented group of hospitality professionals that he has hired over the years.

"When I started out I had very little money but my business partners gave me a small stake in the company. In my own way I have started doing that for the people who work for me. As a young chef employed in a high profile restaurant I realised years ago that my ideas and concepts were ignored because the owners of the restaurant did not want to take suggestions from an employee. One day I finally decided it was time to stop working for somebody else and to give shape to my own ideas. I want my team to be part owners so that they too can fulfil their dreams. I have slowly put my savings into buying out my financiers so that I can make sure that the journey sustains for the people who are in this space because of their passion for it. My restaurants are now slowly becoming places where the chefs or managers who work with me have become part owners."

The man who is the toast of A-listers in London — he has cooked for Prince Charles at St. James Palace and has been invited to meet with the Queen herself — is remarkably grounded and always ready to share the credit for his incredible success.

"If there is one thing that I really care about, it is that I have to share the credit for my success with the team who has been with me all through. If Benares has a Michelin star and we are celebrated widely, it is as much their achievement as mine. One person can just do that much and no more. I am happy that the world is finally celebrating chefs and good food. I never fail to remember that we all need to share the glory with the team because when things go wrong, the team generously gets a portion of the blame!"

With 17 restaurants in various corners of the world, and new ones on the verge of opening in Abu Dhabi and Birmingham, Atul confesses that a chunk of his time is now spent in attending to emails and phone calls from his operations with the result that he has chosen to take himself out of the heart of the kitchen and from behind the stove, at Benares.

"I have realised that if you are part of the kitchen and you don't turn up on time, you end up disrupting everything." Instead, every morning, he turns up at the kitchen, "standing in the corner doing a commie III's job, peeling onions and chopping carrots while occasionally questioning the things that go on. When service starts, he helps with the cooking but it is his executive chef who runs the pass.

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A long time ago, when he was still in hospitality school, Kochhar remembers coming across a book, 'The Business Chef', which fascinated him. Because he could not afford to buy it, he photocopied the entire book. Towards the end of the book was a section which said that there comes a time in the life of every chef when he has to meet and greet guests at the restaurant more than he has to cook.

"I laughed it off then but now I know it is very real. People love it if I say hello to them when they are eating in my restaurant. My regulars expect me to pull up a chair and chat with them. I have learnt to do it all. In the old days there were no cell phones, e-mails or Instagram but the paradigms of business have changed completely and I have learnt to find time to manage all of that."

But no matter how busy his days are, lunch at noon with his team is sacrosanct and he enjoys the time cracking jokes, pulling their leg and catching up with them. "It is important to me to be part of the team. There are people in my kitchen who are from when I was still behind the stove and they know me as Atul and not this celebrity chef I have become."

Having been on a steady diet of Master Chef and other cookery shows and being mother to a pastry chef myself, I have seen how stress levels can sometimes shoot up, especially at peak time in the kitchen. I ask chef Kochhar how he manages to beat the stress.

"My dad once witnessed me losing my cool completely at Benares and he said to me that if I meant to take my success forward and continue making a mark, I would have to learn to keep a cool head. He said that if the general who is leading an army into war panics if he gets shot at, the soldiers will also panic and they will lose the war. But, if the general keeps his calm and continues fighting, the team will also soldier on and they will win the war. I learnt my lesson that day and have applied it to my daily life. It also helps that I am by nature calm and unflustered, no matter how big the situation facing me. Part of the credit also goes to the fact that I regularly practice yoga and I know it keeps both my mind and body in good shape.

With food trends now changing almost every other day, I am curious to know how Kochhar approaches his food. Is he a faddist? How would he describe himself? "I follow the line of traditionalists and struggle with terms such as *authentic* or *progressive food*. I'm definitely not a faddist." I ask him about molecular gastronomy, the trend that had the best chefs in a tizzy a few seasons ago as gourmets queued up to pay big bucks for an MG meal.

"If creating smoke and bubbling chemicals in your food is molecular gastronomy, it is not my cup of tea. Mother nature does enough MG and we don't need to work on it anymore. If I am able to work close to mother nature and work with seasons, I already have 80 per cent of the product ready. I need to just add 20 per cent by combining spices, flavours... and that is easy if we learn that when certain produce grows

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in a season or grows close to each other, their flavours are meant to be together. Try combining things that grow together on a patch or in the same season and they will work splendidly together. Two things from different seasons will not work well together. My job as a chef is to figure out how I can induce more flavour, better texture and spices. I don't want to challenge nature at all. I want to challenge my own culinary skills, get better each day.

I like to work with local ingredients and produce but now that the world has shrunk so much and occasionally I find some international ingredients, I will work with it but the attempt is to not mix chalk and cheese. I am happy to stick to traditions because even if they will change to keep pace with time, their essence will carry on forever. The tradition of using certain techniques and spices will remain."

As a child Atul was scared when he saw his father go through great frustration from failing several times in multiple small businesses that he started. The family suffered hugely from the uncertainty in their lives and the little boy swore that he would never get into business but would find a steady job and take care of his family. He never imagined he would attain the heights that he has but now sees the privileged position he is in.

"For me it is not the multi-million pound business that is the goal. I don't dream too big. We need to have small goals and the big goals will look after themselves. I never say "that is where I want to reach"; whatever I achieve, I say "Wow, another milestone!" For me it is a journey. I don't have a destination. I will keep moving till I am able to. I want to remain busy, I want to tap people with a fierce and burning passion for food and I want to harness their strengths and work with them so that it is a win-win for them and me. I want to create opportunities for people who work with me. The team is always part of my journey. That is the secret of my success." ■