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Asian Fusion
By *Shoba Narayan*

Asian fusion in all but name

Shoba Narayan finds a Singapore four that can blend with the best FT.com site; Jan 23, 2004

Asian Fusion has become a bad word in Singapore's culinary lexicon, a somewhat strange occurrence given that this island-state is home to three of Asia's great cuisines - Indian, Chinese and Malay.

Fusion comes naturally to Singaporeans. Where else can you find the humble English toast slathered with fillings ranging from eggs to coconut custard and sold as kaya toast sandwiches in kopitiams (coffee houses)? Singaporean cooks borrow spices and satays, techniques and curries from their Asian neighbours and blend them with an inventiveness that might be better used elsewhere.

In the past decade, several high-end restaurants used the term Asian fusion as an excuse to serve appallingly bad food. Not surprisingly, they closed. The net result is that Singapore chefs shy away from the term even if they practice it. Here are four restaurants which do, even if a couple of them say they don't.

My Humble House, in spite of its old-fashioned name, is one of the most exciting Chinese restaurants in Singapore with billowing yellow and purple curtains, minimalist wood furniture, flickering candles, and a rose-petal lined private dining room. The young office-going crowd that frequents this place takes full advantage of the communal tables and open kitchen. Owner Andrew Tjoie is not afraid of the word fusion and his influence is obvious in the kitchen. Japan and Italy have little in common but my tempura enoki mushroom appetizer in a sweet basil pesto successfully married this unlikely pair.

Most Chinese restaurants serve dim sum with all the grace of an assembly line, and most patrons shovel them in with the speed of a cement-mixer. But the chef's dim sum trio stood like three little soldiers in the white landscaped plate and forced me to pay attention to their flavours.

Executive chef Thomas Chai is not afraid to take risks even if it means alienating his traditional Chinese clients. His braised shark fin, crabmeat and roe with steamed crab claw in a consommé is a tasty but unorthodox preparation.

Perched high above the South China Sea on Sentosa Island, The Cliff is one of Singapore's most dramatic settings. Chef de cuisine Shawn Armstrong, originally from Texas, revels in the plethora of ingredients available to him. In spite of serving several dishes that bring together Asian and western elements, such as the warm sesame crusted brie de meaux with an Asian pear and ginger jam and garlic confit, Armstrong prefers to call his menu "seafood-inspired" rather than fusion. Among the appetisers, oyster six ways is a hot seller - it serves oysters with six different pairings including champagne granita, truffled scrambled eggs and cucumber jelly.

Chef Miland Sovani insists that the dishes he serves up at Rang Mahal and Vansh, Singapore's best Indian restaurants, aren't fusion - and perhaps they aren't. But he does present traditional Indian dishes in surprising ways - a spinach roll that looks like sushi but is set in a spicy tomato sauce. Other dishes like the Panchratni Dal, which uses five different lentils, are rare but authentic Indian preparations. The lunch buffet includes the usual suspects such as Palak Paneer, lamb vindaloo and tandoori chicken, but also a wonderfully rich seafood-laced Samndari Biryani. Desserts, thankfully, are light and go easy on the sugar - an anomaly for Indian restaurants.

Samia Ahad, owner of Coriander Leaf, is Pakistani by origin and New Yorker by sensibility. She attended culinary school in the Big Apple. She uses both to good effect while teaching busy executives to chop salads and slice salmon at her cooking school-cum-corporate bonding exercise.

Her repertoire is dizzying - everything from Burmese to Turkish. Her speciality is Persian food, and hers is possibly the only restaurant in Singapore that serves Vietnamese rice paper rolls alongside green apple rosti and Persian eggplant and yogurt dip. Her Singaporean chef throws the best naans this side of Tashkent, and her Thai-inspired barramundi was truly uplifting. Such an extensive menu is bound to pay a price, however, and there are some mediocre dishes such as the anise flavoured crispy duck. Desserts include a wonderful poached pear in wine and also the warm Vahlrona chocolate cake.

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