

BACK TO THE CHOPPING BOARD

IMAGE: NEEHAR MISHRA



The traditional Marwari thali served at the Piramal Haveli, Neemrana Hotels, Bagar, Rajasthan

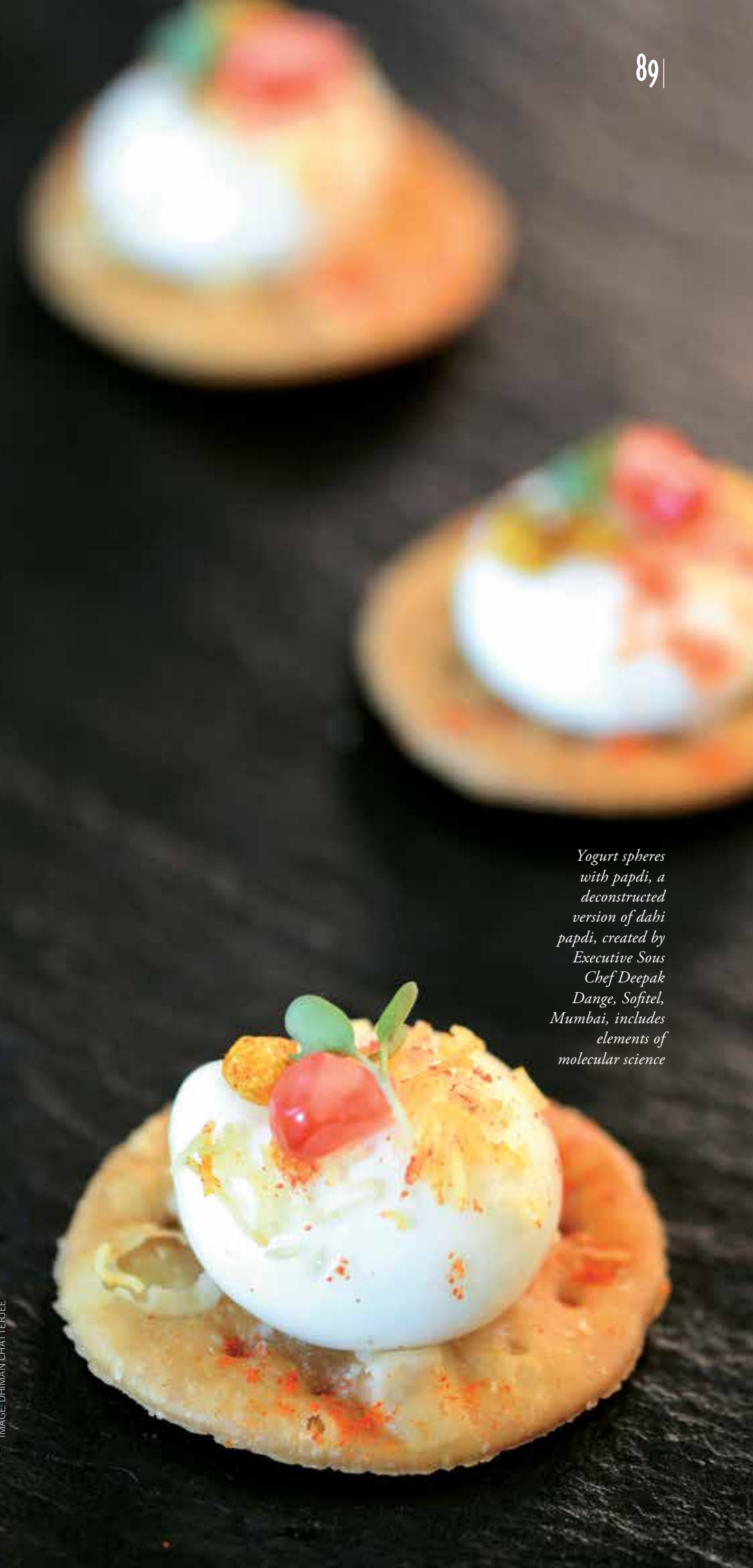
Following the progressive, minimalist trend that has changed the preparation and presentation of food the world over, even Marwari food is beginning to be transformed. We talk to some of the best chefs in the country to see if the flavour and richness of Marwari cuisine can be modernised, and more importantly, if there's any fire behind all the smoke!

Text ✦ Nirati Agarwal

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he culinary landscape in the 21st century is anything but barren. Innovation, nouveaufication and the use of molecular science has changed the otherwise simple experience of dining into one where creativity is prized even more than truffle mushrooms! 'Foams', 'dust' and 'crisps' have made their way around Paris, London, Tokyo and New York and have even crossed over to India, taking centre stage in Indian cuisine no less. Molecular gastronomy has permeated the food culture in the subcontinent, and even Marwari food, much like the sethjis of old, faces a choice: remain traditional or evolve. The question to ask is if the words 'Marwari' and 'modern' go together. Chefs around the country have tackled this phenomenon from two diagonal perspectives: retaining and intensifying traditional flavours or innovating to present something different to modern palates. The point at which their thoughts align is this: offering robust, choice flavours to old hats and modern connoisseurs alike.

IMAGE: DHIRAN CHATTERJEE



Yogurt spheres with papdi, a deconstructed version of dahi papdi, created by Executive Sous Chef Deepak Dange, Sofitel, Mumbai, includes elements of molecular science



IMAGE: DHIMAN CHATTERJEE

Ripe for revision?

In our travels across Rajasthan, in the districts of Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu, and cities like Jaipur, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer, we saw subtle changes that prompted us to ask if we were witnessing a perceptible transformation in the preparation and presentation of Marwari food. While we saw *gatte ki sabzi*, *bajre ki roti* and *papad mangodi* being served in houses and restaurants, we also saw bajra crackers, stuffed *gatta* with micro jelly and *ker ka achaar*. This modernisation was no doubt a result of evolution and the subsequent change in modern Marwari lifestyle.

Marwar's punishing heat and desert terrain made both green, leafy vegetables and water an unaffordable luxury. Influenced by the aridity and harsh climate of the region, typical Marwari cuisine focused on grains (like wheat and millets), was rich in ghee (clarified butter that nourished and strengthened), contained chillies (which prevent sunburn and heat strokes), used condensed milk (rather than water) and

celebrated desert berries and beans (caper-sized *ker* and long, thin *sangri*, which could be dried and preserved for a great length of time). "Non-availability of vegetables brought gram flour to the fore as a major ingredient to make dishes like *gatte ki sabzi* (steamed, spicy gram flour dumplings in a yogurt gravy). Powdered lentils also began to be used to make *mangodi* and *papad*, and was also made into *sabzis* and *khichdis*," explains Sanjeev Kapoor, one of India's best-known chefs and restaurateurs. Even desserts like *lapsi* (made of broken whole wheat and jaggery) and *moong dal halwa*, were made with lentils and grains, and contained mammoth quantities of ghee that protected its consumers from the harsh desert cold.

Heavy on the palate, the quantities of red chilli and ghee used in the bygone era cannot be consumed easily today, and this perhaps necessitates the revision of Marwari food. Both luxury and boutique restaurants that we visited in Rajasthan were already reflecting this change, reducing spices and oil to appeal to modern tastes.

"Nowadays, people are also introducing contemporary ingredients from different regions to skilfully balance traditional food with flavour," says Chef Santosh Chaudhary of Lebua Resort, Jaipur. This addition and deletion of flavour, he explains, started in elite establishments with chefs trained at renowned national and international destinations coming to Rajasthan to cook great food for well-travelled tourists. The tastes seeped into local consciousness and—with the availability of more ingredients, vegetables and garnishes—were adopted by local restaurants, then caterers and finally reached home cooks, who were eager to prepare something different.

Chefs sought to retain traditional recipes but used Mathania chillies, for example, to temper the *tadka* rather than add it to the dish itself. Visual appeal and texture now became important and so did the use of innovative cooking practices. Borrowing from the past, chefs made use of techniques like the Rajasthani *dungar* mode of cooking, which involves smoking the prepared dish



IMAGE: NEEHAR MISHRA



IMAGE: DHIMAN CHATTERJEE

for subtle flavour and aroma. If food is emblematic of a region, then it is imperative that its core remain traditional, and chefs around the country have realised and respected this, especially when it comes to Marwari cuisine. Innovation has thus come in the form of minimalist plating and adding texture.

Answering to authenticity

Globally-renowned chefs like René Redzepi, Tetsuya Wakuda and Daniel Boulud, who have set the standard for modern food, have now begun focusing on foraging locally grown ingredients and looking to vegetables as the hero of the dish. What this means for Marwari food is a hat tip to the traditional recipes and ingredients. "Marwari food is still the way it is and will always be. We make some changes to it to adapt to our lifestyles, but essentially a *baati* is a *baati*," says Kapoor, with his usual penchant for

retaining authenticity. A case in point is the *ker sangri ka achaar* that we tried at Jaisalmer's beautiful Suryagarh resort, which featured *ker sangri* imbued with lemon and masalas and pickled for 15 days. This *achaar*, brainchild of Sous Chef Bhavarlal and Executive Sous Chef Chetan, heads in that traditional yet modern direction, containing intense, concentrated flavours of *ker* and *sangri*, and bringing out their natural taste. Rather than the calorific ghee-fried *baati*, we tried Sous Chef Deepak Dange's baked *baati* at fine-dining vegetarian restaurant Tuskers at Sofitel, Mumbai, and found it as *khasta* (if not as mind-numbingly tasty) as its heavyweight cousin. Keeping the core of the recipes the same, chefs have experimented with plating and presentation. Chef Dange's imaginative *papad mangodi ki sabzi*, delicately spooned onto biscuit *bajra bakhri* discs, are bite-sized tapas versions of its traditional avatar.

Clockwise from above: *Ghwari* cheesecake with pistachio dust and almond chikki served at The Masala Library, Mumbai, is a modern, epicurean version of the traditional dish; *Papad mangodi ki sabzi*, served tapas style on *bajra bakhri* discs created by Chef Deepak Dange, Sofitel, Mumbai; The traditional *ker sangri*, served at the Piramal Haveli, Neemrana Hotels, Bagar, Rajasthan

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“Chefs are bringing sophistication into the cuisine, using the same ingredients differently—I have noticed bajra tortillas being used instead of *maida* for wraps,” says celebrity chef Ajay Chopra. Jiggs Kalra’s Masala Library, at the forefront of gastronomic experimentation with inherently Indian flavours, also features the lovely *bhindi jaipuri*, *papad ki sabzi* and hand-pounded *churma* into one cracker of a dish that assimilates three flavours and textures seamlessly—new but authentic! “Indian cuisine is undergoing a revolution of sorts, which is primarily being driven by global exposure and varied experience of guests. As such, various regional cuisines are not just witnessing modernisation, but also getting an opportunity to come out of their regional domains and become more visible and accessible to diners across various parts of the country and the world,” explains Zorawar Kalra, Jiggs Kalra’s son and founder and MD of Massive Restaurants Pvt Ltd.

Modestly Modern

One of the ways in which we saw regional Marwari food don a classier, edgier cape is in Chef Ajay Chopra’s standout *pithaud* cakes with masala green peas and apple chutney, which marries old flavours with new, adding some molecular science for pizzazz. “Some chefs are creating magic by combining old flavours with ingredients which have never been used in Marwari cooking,” says Chopra. “Change, after

all, is the only thing that’s constant, and the same has to apply to food.” In the same vein, we also saw Chef Dange’s minimalistic plating of *dal baati churma* contain something totally unique. While the dal and *baati* retained original tastes, the *churma* was a crystalline crumble, paying homage to the desert sand, and came flavoured with chilli and strawberry! “The *churma* is supposed to be a bit sweet, so I thought of adding some seasonal fruit for tartness,” says Chef Dange; and why not!

Giving an innovative twist to easily procured local ingredients, Suryagarh’s Chef Chetan has also added the *sangri kebab* to the menu, which features finely minced desert beans with potato and spices to create a melt-in-your-mouth, slow-cooked kebab that defies description. “The idea is to make local produce the hero of the dish and create something unique,” he explains, adding, “After all, what’s the point in being too exotic?” If not exotic, then definitely experimental, taste the ghevar cheesecake with pistachio dust and almond chikki at Masala Library to appreciate invention with tradition at its heart. The honeycomb textured *ghewar* sitting on a cheesecake-like base with a thick, saffron-infused *rabdi* poured over it, garnished with a brittle almond wafer that glistens in the light, offers the best of old and new to meld into a sinfully good dessert.



Food, as we know it

They say necessity is the mother of invention. While that is true, in the case of Marwari food, it is also to give creativity free rein. Less ghee, more flavour, less sweet, more simple, less chilli, more experimental, less quantity, more complicated: the scales never quite balance and perhaps that is the beauty of food. Sanjeev Kapoor puts it beautifully when he says that at least in India, tradition is the basis of innovation. In a bid to innovate, let’s not lose out on tradition. No matter how much chefs play around with flavour combinations and modern preferences, if there’s one thing we know about the Marwari community, it’s this: as much as evolution and adaptation is part of its DNA, so is respecting and maintaining its traditions. The food, as it was, isn’t going anywhere soon, but, oh, isn’t it a brave new world? *

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Above: Stuffed gatte ki sabzi served at Lebuva resort, Jaipur

Left: A modernised version of dal baati churma at Tuskers restaurant, Softel, Mumbai with baked baati, and strawberry and chilli-infused churma

