



A surprise at supper



PRIYADARSHINI PAITANDY

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Master of spices Manoj Padmanabhan R Ravindran

Manoj Padmanabhan crunches numbers by day, and chops and dices meat and vegetables for a hobby

What's in Manoj Padmanabhan's check-in luggage when he returns from a trip? Skillets, skewers, paella pans, and woks – a wide selection of them from Japan, Thailand, China, Spain... "These are hand-painted martini glasses I picked up from a local artist in Mexico," says Padmanabhan, producing a vibrant thin-stemmed glass from a cabinet that's carefully arranged with myriad kitchen artefacts.

A passionate cook, Padmanabhan has been hosting friends and serving them a variety of innovative dishes for as long as he can remember. He launched his brand Big Bandha earlier this year, and set up a stall at the International Food Carnival and was delighted when it was sold out in a little over a couple of hours. His next venture is an eight-course sit-down dinner he's hosting this Friday for a group of 30. The meal is divided under different categories – Nibbles, Yet to Start, You Click! You Eat, Small Plate, Talk O, Fill Belly, Last Mile and Cheque Please.

"Some of the dishes on the menu are: Out of Poori, which is deconstructed pani poori with *ragi murukku*; *gulti* kebab – chicken kebab glazed with *gonkura* buffalo sauce; blue crab taco with wasabi mayo; and penne tossed with butter chicken masala," says Padmanabhan, who wants to keep the rest of the menu a surprise for diners. "I want them to have fun. Everything on the

plate will be something new. It is a fusion of unusual flavours. While dinner is on, there will be a retro live performance of Tamil and Hindi songs by singer MJ Sriram," adds Padmanabhan, as he delicately plates a dish he's just created – reminiscent of talented *MasterChef* contestants. "I've made a vinaigrette out of *gochujang* (a Korean red chilli paste) and added honey, soy sauce, lemon juice and sesame oil to it. That's my salad dressing," he says, holding up a vibrant and refreshing green apple, cucumber and pumpkin salad.

The process of coming up with new flavours involves Padmanabhan standing by his olive-panelled kitchen counter with a notebook and a host of skillets, pans and ingredients strewn around. One of his most exotic fusion was when he mixed Mexican and Japanese flavours to create blue crab taco with wasabi mayo at the 2013 SuperChef Chennai contest, a title he won that year.

The 37-year-old CEO of The Mayavaram Financial Chit Corporation has just returned from a business trip to Singapore. It was perfect timing, as he managed to bring back ingredients such as Sichuan pepper, wasabi paste, fig jam and buffalo sauce, all of which he will use for this dinner. "I plan to organise six events in a year. The other idea is to organise a healthy breakfast at Besant Nagar beach or a Sunday Market... the challenge is waking up early on a Sunday," he laughs.