

Drumstick paya and Tex Mex Bhel anybody?

Manoj Padmanaban's curated menu at The Park Chennai serves up everyday food with a global twist
08:25 AM Jul 21, 2017 | [Daniel Thimmayya](#)



It is said that every man has a past. In Manoj Padmanaban's case, it's probably more pasta than 'a past', and it's most probably pinned together with a hunk of paya.

Piqued yet?

If you're someone who has grown up eating on the streets of Chennai, the *real* streets — the *salna*, *kothu parotta*, *kalakki* kind, then this assortment of curious dishes will take you back in time. If those words sound more like Latin to you, then the things they're paired with — which could be anything from a hunk of gruyere to some wasabi mayo — will probably sound more appetising.



Tex Mex Bhel

Fusion is so yesterday

Fusion food is something that I've come to have an instant dread for over the years, with all due respect to the inventive spirits of chefs past, present and future. So I'm instantly gladdened when Manoj tells me that his food is anything but fusion. "It's essentially everyday food that I've grown up eating and loving, made fancy and exotic with little twists of global cooking that I picked up during my time in the US and everywhere else," says the city-based sales guy-turned-business owner-turned-

amateur superchef. Local food with a dash of "Bandha", he says with a short laugh, explaining why his food forays are branded with the 'extremely Chennai' moniker Big Bandha.

Seated in The Park's plush 601 diner, which will host Manoj's specially curated menu, I'm instantly drawn to the delightfully 'twisted' vegetarian starters — *Green Bean Fries*, a panko crusted, flash-fried version of french fries made with beans with a dollop of wasabi mayo on the side and *Tex Mex Bhel*, which is more red bean and nachos than sev and sauce.



Paya ramen

carnivore in him every Thursday, when meat was tabooed at home. So I politely piped down and gave the drumstick a gentle pull. It wasn't half bad.

The pull of Paya

Just as Manoj is telling me how he's been moonlighting in the food biz between closed door dinners and pop-up food stalls, the piping hot Paya Ramen arrives. Now, I love my paya as much as the next man, so I'm let down that this is a dish made for vegetarians, with drumstick of all things. "It's a perfect vegetarian recreation of a Paya curry based on my mother's old kitchen secrets," he explains somberly.

Apparently, it was her way of appeasing the

The *Baked Parotta* was the bomb. If you're someone who loves the ripped up parottas that you get soaked in *servai* and *salna* off the *thallu vandis* (food push-carts), then this is the closest you're going to get to a Michelin-Star style version. The uniformly soaked parottas are bound together with cheese and baked ever-so-subtly to make it look and feel like lasagne. Fancy that. (Note to self: Tell *thallu vandi* dude to introduce an 'extra cheese' option at ten bucks a pop)



Dark rose

Kiss from a dark rose

As we swish past an extra thick *Quail-ation*, some Sri Lankan-style *Kaadai masala* wrapped in a *Rumali roti*, I'm already geared up for dessert. Manoj talks up the *Thai falooda*, because like most of us Thailand is a place that holds plenty of memories for him, but what I am truly blown away by is the innocuously named *Dark Rose*. As Joey Tribbiani would say: Chocolate

Mousse - Good. Rose Syrup - Good. Saffron Ice Cream - Good. Try it for sure.

It's the kind of meal that deserved a loudish burp as the supreme compliment. But owing to the fact that we were this was more food couture than T Nagar's battery of food-carts, a satisfied smirk is all we allowed ourselves.