



preview

Glocal adrenaline

Paaya made with drumstick, Tex Mex Bhel and Baked Parotta. This curated list serves up curiosity from the get-go

Pics: Romani Agarwal



Paaya Ramen

Dark Rose

Tex Mex Bhel

Manoj Padmanaban

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 wasabi mayo — will probably sound more appetising.

Everyday exotic

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. So I'm instantly gladdened when Manoj tells me that his food is anything but fusion. "It's everyday food that I've grown up eating and loving, made 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 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 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.

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 kitchen secrets," he explains somberly. Apparently, it was her way of appeasing the 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 Baked *Parotta* was the bomb. If you love the ripped up *parottas* that one gets 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.

Kiss from a 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 Thailand holds memories for him, but I'm blown away by 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 deserves a loud burp as a supreme compliment. But owing to the fact that this was more food couture than T Nagar's battery of food-carts, a satisfied smirk is all we allow ourselves.

C'est la vie.

From July 21 to 30. Degustation: veg ₹799, non veg ₹999.

Details: 42676000

— Daniel Thimmayya