

Eating Out

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Signed, sealed, delivered

Sanjeev Kapoor has recently put his Signature on the Abu Dhabi culinary scene. Liz Totton sits down with the celebrity chef to talk about his passion for food

While there is no shortage of Indian fare in the capital, top-end fine dining Indian restaurants are not as ubiquitous here as many other European cuisines. We have always felt that there was room for more restaurants to push the boundaries of Indian cuisine alongside city favourite Ushna and 2014's TOAD Indian Restaurant of the Year, Spice Mela.

Enter Sanjeev Kapoor. His 8,500 sq ft, fine dining restaurant, Signature, has just opened in the Nation Galleria mall. It is his first restaurant in Abu Dhabi and also his first ever shopping mall diner.

Kapoor is one of the world's most well-known celebrity chefs. His pioneering television show *Khana Khazana* has run for 18 years, and is the longest-running TV cooking show in Asia. His success led CNN to name him one of the top five celebrity chefs in the world, alongside Heston Blumenthal, Gordon Ramsay, Jamie Oliver and Wolfgang Puck. Kapoor's website gets more than 25 million hits a month, and his 36 books have sold over 10 million copies. He's a star of *MasterChef India*, and he operates approximately 50 restaurants throughout the world.

Though he has his hands in a lot of cooking pots, he remains a chef at heart. TOAD stole a few moments with one of the busiest chefs in the world to discuss his passion: Indian food.

Signature has recently opened at Nation Galleria Mall. This is your first shopping mall outlet. Why Nation Galleria?

Our Signature brand would ordinarily never open in a mall, but we researched this mall extensively – how it was conceived, its location etc. In a sense, this mall is an extension of a luxury hotel [St. Regis Abu Dhabi]. It looked great on paper, and when we



Sanjeev Kapoor

saw it in person, we knew it was a perfect fit.

Describe the Signature concept to us.

Signature is an expression of what Indian food means to me. When I

started cooking and travelling, I realised that the way Indian food is seen globally is very different from what we eat in India. There are also two very distinct styles of Indian food, restaurant style and home-style. I am trying to return to a more traditional way of cooking while using the modern aesthetics of how we serve food.

What sets Signature apart?

There is a certain expectation with Indian food. One might refer to butter chicken or tikka masala and you salivate over the taste, texture and flavours at the mere mention. This is a good thing. I don't want to reinvent the wheel, but I want to leave my mark on the cuisine. I would say that chefs shouldn't mess with Indian food so it loses its tradition and its

individuality, but please, add your signature to the cuisine. Leave your mark as to who and what we are today, and make your dish reflect zeitgeist of the times. This is what we are trying to do at Signature. We have

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taken a well-loved traditional cuisine and put our unique stamp on it. We respect the tradition while making it relevant with today's tastes.

Are people surprised at how different your food tastes to their expectations of what Indian food should taste like?

There are two sets of diners, those who are uninformed about what Indian food is and there are those who know or think they know what Indian food is. In 1989, I opened a restaurant in New Zealand and I was cooking exactly as we do in restaurants in India. I had a British customer say to me, 'Sir, I love your food, but this is not how Indian food is done. This is not how biryani is cooked'.

I have eaten a lot of food in London and I was very young then, but I understood his message. His position made me want to educate both the unaware and the people who think they know what Indian food is. I want people to know what creates that riot of flavours in your mouth when you eat Indian food; it's not just the chili pepper.

It's been said that most people either love or hate Indian food based upon its pervasive use of chili peppers.

It's not the chili pepper at all, though I love them. It's the layers and layers of flavours, and the texture. There are four elements that distinguish Indian food. They are the spices and herbs that we use, the unique combinations of those spices and herbs, the techniques that we cook with and the way we serve our food.

The spices we use are so bold that in one single taste, you might recognise more than 15 to 20 contrasting tastes exploding in your mouth. What other cuisine can you say this about? In other places, I feel chefs are too timid with their spices. It tends to be a dash of thyme here and a smidgen of oregano there.

Indian food may be one of those cuisines that if you don't like it on your first taste, you may never like it at all. But, if you like it even just a bit, as you taste more, it can become addictive. There is nothing like it in the world and every part of India has its own unique cuisine. You could never sample it all; it's inexhaustible. **India is so vast. Is it even possible to paint all 'Indian cuisine' with one brush?**

Great question. One lifetime is not enough to try everything that we call 'Indian food' – even for a person like me who travels and eats for a living. **So are you still discovering new ingredients and techniques in India?**

I discover new things every day. How many places on earth are we still discovering new herbs, spices and cooking techniques? In remote villages, one can still discover an entirely new spice, dish, even a new vegetable. Everything grows in India, and everything is fresh. Friends'



Khaas pani poori



Signature appetiser



Tawa maachi



Dum Nariyali prawns



Clay pot tandoori chicken

Do you ever tire of cooking or find it repetitive?

Cooking will always be my first love and my greatest passion. If I ever stop loving it, I will stop cooking. I am very successful; I have no financial need to work anymore, so I only do what I love. Cooking entralls me because you can create something new and exciting every day and never get bored of it. There are set rules that you must adhere to, but they are not so rigid that you are ever wrong. Sometimes you are surprised and sometimes disappointed, but you always strive to do it much better the next time.

Is there anything about you our readers would be surprised to find out?

I think people would be surprised to know that I am a percussionist. I have long found inspiration for cooking through music. A song may trigger an idea for a recipe or vice versa. I try not to limit myself to any one medium. I do whatever inspires me – I am happiest living this way. *Signature by Sanjeev Kapoor. Sunday-Wednesday 10am-midnight and Thursday-Saturday 10am-2am. Level One, Nation Galleria, Nation Towers, info@skrestaurants.com, www.skrestaurants.com (02 666 4343).*

mothers and grandmothers regularly teach me new techniques. **These grandmas must be thrilled to invite a celebrity chef into their kitchen and teach you to cook?**

It's a thrill for me too. I never get tired of learning. I love it when people share their family's secret recipes with me. I have made a business of sharing everything I know. They know their recipes will not be lost with me. I will share them with the world and keep their legacy alive.

You certainly have the platform to share.

Thankfully, I do, and people know this. That is why they share them. I convey an excitement for our cuisine, and I think that is clear to see. **Do you get many invitations to dinner? I think people would find it daunting to cook for a famous master chef.**

I think I actually do miss out on some invitations for this reason, but what few people know about me is that I am the most congenial guest. My eye and my taste buds are trained to find goodness in whatever is in front of me. I will never reject something prepared with love.



Signature's open kitchen