



Koji, Conrad A Lavish Asian Invasion

Conrad Pune's flagship restaurant unfurls an intriguing feast for sight, soul and stomach.

Conrad's enormous, granite-laden appearance in the city has raised Pune's luxury quotient a few notches higher

My eyes are transfixed above me, at the perfect cocoons of firefly-like hand-blown glass lights, each cluster dangling delicately from the sky. Their radiance illuminates the rich shades of reds and maroons, resulting in an Asian décor experience that, though still wrapped in traditional hues, eschews cliché for a little thing called class.

Ever since Conrad made its enormous, granite-laden appearance in the city, Pune's luxury quotient has risen a fair few notches higher. The property revels in the kind of extravagance that refuses to shout out from the rooftops but would much rather whisper into the ears

of a discreet, discerning audience. And Koji appears to be an encapsulation of that philosophy.

The warmth of the aforementioned textures and the dignity of dark wood afford this vast space a sense of quiet complexity. The tables, divans and private dining reserves are well spaced out, giving you the freedom to indulge in Koji's Oriental accents without being accosted by neighbourly chitchat. If anything, the restaurant feels a bit too sparse and I recommend arriving here well past nine in the night to enjoy the address at its vibrant best.

Japanese, Chinese and Thai specialties make up Koji's oeuvre, complemented by a

rolling parade of exotic Asian cocktails and a selection of sake rice wines. The Vegetable Crystal Dumplings—a crunchy collage of water chestnut, celery, and carrot, and Chef Tenzin's Signature Truffle Edamame Dumplings—a piquant merging of two affluent flavours are excellent places to start and offer solid proof of Koji's mastery over the humble dumpling.

While I'm well open to its Thai and Chinese offerings as crafted by Head Chef Hitesh Rai, it's Koji's Japanese cuisine that's on my mind, even as I relish the feisty crunch of wok-tossed chicken, cashew nuts, onions, and bell peppers in the Koji Chicken. The



Conrad's Executive Chef Mandar Madhav infuses artistry and creativity into his food. **Top:** Asian Butter Garlic Prawns

Burnt Chilli Stuffed Tofu Crumbles offer yet more evidence of Koji's way with flavour



A Private Affair

For those in need of intimacy, Koji's 12-person private dining room is a tasteful, immaculately decorated space replete with a private kitchen and expert pampering.

Oh So Sake!

The restaurant's star attraction is its picture-perfect sake cellar, an eye-catching, floor-to-ceiling masterpiece filled with 21 individual sake brews and their deviations, resting peacefully in artistic Japanese pouches.

impossibly delicate Steamed Sea Bass, whose subtle flavours are accentuated by Thai herbs, garlic and chilli drizzle, only serves to fan my appetite for Koji's *pièce de résistance*—its sushi.

Promising myself I'll return for the rich assortment of exotic noodles, rice and Thai curries, I opt straight for the Koji Experience Platter. This ravishing collection of Sashimi, Nigiri and Chef's Signature Rolls is sushi at its best—minimal yet layered, elegant yet prone to pieces of individual flash—in other words, excellent, as befitting a restaurant with a dedicated sushi bar handled by chefs



Food	★★★★
Ambience	★★★★
Service	★★★★★
Washrooms	★★★★
Overall Experience	★★★★
* Rating on Five	

both naturally birthed and expertly trained in the ways of sushi.

Traversing Red Tuna Maguro, Salmon Sake, Yellowtail Hamachi and Barbecued Eel Unagi, amongst other fine variants, the platter delivers on every level. Within the Signature Rolls, the smoked salmon and secret sauce assemblage of the Signature Koji, and the reassuring fluidity of Prawn Tempura with Creamy Salmon leave me with no room for complaint or conversation.

My experience this evening has been accompanied by moody, cosmopolitan tunes and the crisp aromas of smoked apple

wood-infused Old Fashion. Koji falters slightly with its sparse dessert offerings, and while my Dark Chocolate Pocket escorted by lemongrass ice-cream is perfectly pleasant, I can't help but think that the address needs more creativity in bidding its clientele goodbye on a perfect note.

Another glass of Smoked Apple Wood in hand, watching Koji's stylish black cutlery, excellent staff and inherent warmth blend in harmony, it occurs to me that though it might fail to hit the high notes on a few odd occasions, Koji is an Asian symphony well worth savouring. ■

7, Mangaldas Road, Pune, 020-67456745 • www.conradpune.com

Text: Siddharth Dasgupta