



Pune

Sibling Revelry

Mumbai may be the cooler cousin, but Pune is fast catching up on the 'cool' factor in its culinary offerings.

Mumbai's the cooler cousin, always ready to blaze through the night in a furious collage of sexy bars, foreign liaisons, and Bollywood-laced revelry. Pune's the studious one, head buried in a book, curious about the world but shy to peek its head out. Save for the narcotic-kissed mysticism of the Osho Ashram, that's been the script all along.

Then, about a decade or so ago, something changed. Pune began to acquire some style. It acquired a couple of the country's best alternative music venues; it began cultivating the sort of ethic that compels expats to stay and seduces exiles into returning home. Cut to now, and the cousins seem more at par than they've ever been. As Mumbai's residents and restaurants keep flocking this way, now seems a good time to profile two hot new Mumbai-connected citizens of the city's culinary bouquet.

Sassy Diner

As I step into The Sassy Spoon with my dining companion, what strikes me is the sense of space and light at play. Even

for the focal Koregaon Park neighbourhood, blessed with abundant greenery and the gift of largesse as it is, Sassy has much to preen about. Its main villa is flanked by floor-to-ceiling twin-windows that help accentuate the resto-bar's taller-than-usual double-storeyed span. Peering out at an al fresco space with *Romeo & Juliet*-style balconies and a front porch that houses The Sassy Teaspoon—a dedicated artisanal patisserie space—I'm fairly convinced that the address is entitled to its name.

On manager Nilesh Ayyar's recommendations, we begin with the Spiced Chicken Poi and the Raw Mango and Papaya Salad. While the former is a pleasant, if slightly salty, starter, the latter's surprise elements of salted peanuts and sweet chili drizzle help bring out the main ingredients in a surprisingly fresh avatar. "You can't find this sort of space in Mumbai," Ayyar tells me. "While the original SoBo and Bandra address will always be coveted, we've got our hopes high for Pune."

The "we" in question is Irfan Pabaney—the illustrious Chef whose Indigo and Hakkan-furbished CV have birthed Sassy's food ethic, and Rachel Goenka—whose Le Cordon Bleu training and nomadic ways have resulted in the patisserie and several of the address's stylistic flourishes. As I look around me and savour the fragrances at play, I realise that Pabaney and Goenka have created a space expected of them; yet, it is rather individual; a place where flashes of pink mingle with sprinklings of turquoise and dark wood, where measured European sensibilities co-exist with the finality of global fare being created with decidedly Indian passion.

Catering to our seafood cravings, our Aglio Olio Risotto with Curried Prawns and a Steamed Tamarind and Chili Spiced Rawas arrive at the table. The reviewer in me wants to find the minutest of faults; the gastronome in me is unable to find any. This is simple food done exquisitely well, with the fresh breeze of the Mediterranean and the lingering romance of India's western and southern coastlines



Cajun spiced chicken with mac and queso



The Sassy Teaspoon offers enough quirk to keep the Instagrammers happy

The Bar

Head Mixologist Pranav Mody pours knowledge and passion into every creation. His Morning Brew is a standout—whiskey, vanilla, espresso, and house-infused orange liqueur dancing dangerously with desire.

to reveal potent punches of spice; it's only when you take a bite of the accompanying coconut rice, bathed in the effluence of milk, do you realise that this is a marriage concocted in heaven.

False ceilings were all the rage roughly eight years ago. To look up and see yet another one makes me yearn for something fresh. On cue, our Dark Chocolate and Baileys Fondant arrives, infusing the afternoon's experience with a kick of dark, a kiss of liquid white chocolate, and the subtlety of pine nut ice-cream. She may call herself sassy, but this lady is elegance much of the way.

suffused within each bite. The precisely cooked, minimally furnished risotto bristles beneath the naked passion of prawns simmering with Indian spice and everything that's nice. The Rawas emerges from its banana leaf robe

C-2, Ashok Chakra Society, Koregaon Park, Pune. • thesassyspoon.in



Mini Raj Kachori makes for a crisp and crunchy starter

Artistic flourishes and innovative presentations are the high points of Farzi Cafe

Hardly Smoke & Mirrors

I never cared much for science at school; I tend to care even less now when it's messing with my food and drink. Which is why I'm relieved when Sous de Chef Durgesh Bhogvekar tells me that molecular gastronomy's assortment of bells and whistles constitute less than 10 per cent of Farzi's oeuvre. "More importantly," he continues, "smoke, nitrogen and crushed ice are only amateurish versions of molecular; at Farzi, we elevate things by going deeper."

First things first: Farzi Café is a purebred Delhi native. It arrives in Pune after having created much ruckus in Mumbai, and thus, the siblings' umbilical cord remains steadfast. Culinary impresario Zorawar Kalra's baby, the modern Indian bistro has grown its cult on the basis of marrying global cuisine with earthy Indian flavours, amidst Liberace-like flair.

To get a true taste of Chef de Cuisine Saurabh Udinia's philosophy, my friends and I have opted for a roving parade of smaller starters. As the revelry begins, I begin ticking emotions and sensations off in my mind: amusement, elation, and even nostalgia.

The Tempura Fried Prawns elicits contentment as it is excellently spiced, while its prone-to-be-made-fun-of Nimboo Mirchi Air turns out to be a delicious kick of fluffy, lemon-drenched ingenuity; the Mini Raj Kachori with Chutney Foam, a tangy accented delight, takes a humble street staple and elevates it to the realms of regal kitchens; the Delhi Belly Tikka with Murabba Glaze adds a touch of refined global taste to a feisty Indian street fighter; while the Smoked Pathar

The Bar

With treasures like the smoke-engulfed Apple Foamintini and the vodka and Earl Grey lashings of Chai Paani, Head Mixologist Aman Dua's cocktails are a rowdy mélange of playfulness and sophistication.

ke Kebab is a standout, three thin slivers of beef cooked on stone, with a Wasabi Walnut Chutney to deliver an Indo-Japanese accent worth repeating.

Our array of mains offer a similarly arresting confluence of flavours and experimentations. Spaghetti Aglio Olio would've been a perfectly pleasant bowl of spaghetti, if not for the fact that it's been cooked in a rich, creamy coconut sauce and positively revels in its Indian avatar. Mutton Irachi Pepper Fry offers more proof of Farzi's finesse at taking something quintessentially Indian and transforming it with European technique, and vice-versa. The coup de grâce arrives in the form of a Macher Jhol XO Jhal Muri; the Bengali half of me is consumed by its rustic truthfulness, with the potently spiced, lightly fried fish dancing in the robustness of generously bathed mustard and a mustard-accentuated gravy.

The artistic flourishes and innovative presentations have nearly all worked (save a tacky exception or two—here's looking at you, CTM Chicken Tikka in a phone booth), and the molecular touches have only helped entrench Farzi as an address worth treasuring. This Pune address isn't half as sexy as its Mumbai and Delhi counterparts, but as I take in Farzi's alchemy between culinary art and rustic deliciousness, I admit that city comparisons seem churlish when it's the Indian gourmand who's coming up trumps. **E**

Level 1 and 2, Fortaleza Complex, Kalyani Nagar, Pune. • farzicafe.com