



Sea and spice

‘I create Indian food with a modern accent,’ Atul Kochhar tells me. The first Indian chef to be awarded a Michelin star is bringing his cuisine to the high seas. We are sitting having afternoon tea at his restaurant, Benares, on Berkeley Square in Mayfair, London. Awarded a Michelin-star in 2007, Benares is Kochhar’s base and one of the capital’s best Indian restaurants.

However, the downturn has meant that even Benares is suffering. ‘We are feeling the slowdown,’ he explains. ‘We are grateful that people are coming but the average spend is down 25% compared to last year. There is nothing we can do.’ Despite cutting his staff from 16 to 11 and adjusting prices, Kochhar remains philosophical. ‘I have not changed my thinking,’ he says. ‘I will not use New Zealand lamb and Australian beef just to save money. I believe strongly in fresh, local ingredients. If my profit margins are going to be squeezed for the time being, so be it.’

In 2008, Kochhar signed a deal with P&O Cruises to launch a fine dining restaurant on board the company’s new superliner, the *Azura*, which is launching in April 2010. ‘I had never taken a cruise in my life, to be honest, so I had very little clue before P&O approached me,’ he says. ‘I was not looking for it.’ Kochhar got to know more about ships and even took his first cruise with his family to the Norwegian fjords. ‘All you do is spend quality time with yourself and your family,’ he says. ‘It is very relaxing – no internet, no mobile phone.’

It also allowed the chef a chance to visit a working kitchen at sea. ‘I’ve never experienced a kitchen that operates and picks up 1,800 soups and 1,800 main courses in one go,’ he says. ‘That was a learning curve for me.’ Kochhar also visited the *Ventura*’s Asian and Pacific cuisine restaurant East. ‘It was fabulous,’ he explains. ‘A great experience that proved quality food can be produced at sea. I took time out to work in the kitchen that day just to see how the equipment works.’

Kochhar is currently working closely with Mike Monahan, corporate chef for P&O’s hotel services and entertainments department. The name of the *Azura*’s restaurant, *Sindhu*, signifies the river Indus, and means ‘fusion’ in Hindi. ‘That’s what my cuisine is, an amalgamation of British and Indian, so *Sindhu* is just the right name,’ he says.



When Michelin-starred gourmet chef **Atul Kochhar** brings his cooking to the *Azura* in 2010, he will join the ranks of P&O’s prestigious roster of big-name chefs. As he tells Christopher Kanal, he is relishing the challenge of bringing Indian food to the high seas.



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Kochhar will be serving his signature modern British dishes with an Indian twist. 'Sindhu is going to be a reflection of Benares, but in a different way,' he explains. 'The ship works with a smaller menu so we are creating six starters, six main courses and four desserts.'

Chef's roster

Kochhar will join P&O's existing celebrity chefs Marco Pierre White, who oversees restaurants on the *Ventura* and *Aurora* and offers private cookery classes, and Gary Rhodes, who has restaurants on the *Arcadia* and *Oriana*.

Of course, P&O Cruises is not the only cruise operator to have a celebrity chef on board. Celebrity Cruises has Michel Roux, Cunard has TV chef Todd English and Crystal Cruises boasts Michelin-starred Japanese chef Nobu Matsuhisa and Italian restaurateur Piero Selvaggio.

As these chefs can testify, preparing food at sea offers its own challenges. But for Kochhar, the biggest obstacle to serving gourmet Indian cuisine at sea is not the absence of gas stoves, traditionally considered vital in Indian cookery – 'Electric is no different from gas and is so close you can almost control it better as well' – but adapting new techniques and sourcing the spices and ingredients for his signature dishes. 'How am I going to marinate my meats?' he asks. But running a restaurant at sea will not be much different from on land. 'It's not like being in space or in the air,' he says.

Sindhu's team will consist of around eight chefs, half of which will be from Benares and the remainder from P&O Cruises. Kochhar will also be giving his input on the wine list. 'I have made it a personal ambition to make people drink wine with Indian food,' he says. 'Every food can be paired with wine

with a little bit of knowledge.' Kochhar has a big task ahead of him considering how, particularly in the UK, beer is traditionally drunk with Indian food. Wine is not usually seen as an accompaniment to a spicy curry but according to Kochhar, this is more to do with habit than culinary culture.

The *Azura's* 3,100 passengers will have 11 dining options to choose from, including a 'Select Dining' restaurant and wine bar named The Glass House with

wines chosen by sommelier Olly Smith.

Kochhar will join the *Azura* in March when it floats out from Venice for its first sailing to Southampton where he will cook for P&O chiefs and the staff. Kochhar has good sea legs. 'I have travelled by Indian Railways, which is worse than this,' he says. 'Plates keep moving around the table. You begin with a starter of your own and you finish with someone else's dessert.' *wc*

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