

THE *art*

OF CONSTANT ARRIVAL

After drinking vodka in Vladivostok and avoiding horsemeat in Bishkek, chef Alex Moser finds himself scouring India for ingredients **By Sonal Shah**

Chef Alex Moser arrived in India on a Saturday last year, to begin cooking up a food plan for Andaz, the new hotel by Hyatt in Delhi's Aerocity. "On Sunday," Moser recalls, "my boss took me to Gurudwara Bangla Sahib's kitchen where they cook 25,000 meals daily. Wow!" The burly 34-year-old chef takes a rare pause for breath, but his ever-present grin doesn't falter. "At that time, last year, we had the refugee issue," he continues, alluding to the charged debate in his home country of Germany, "we were talking about how to help, what to do—but 25,000 meals—it was mind-blowing."

"Then my boss said, OK, next step, Old Delhi—straight into the meat market, the spice market." Moser pauses again, leaning back in his chair at our table at AnnaMaya, the restaurant and food hall at Andaz. "I was like, are you serious?"

As a widely travelled chef, Moser has had his share of eye-opening travel experiences over his 18-year career with Hyatt. He's been based out of Dubai, Russia, Switzerland and Turkey, with stops and stints everywhere from Gran Canaria island to Nice, Cannes, Yerevan and Bishkek. It was in Spain, while working briefly for a composer, that he developed a paranoia of cockroaches (after having one invade his pants in the vegetable garden); and in Kyrgyzstan that he discovered the outer limits of his gastronomic curiosity. "They do horsemeat sausages—they're really heavy, rustic, thick with fat pieces inside. Now in the south of Germany we too eat horsemeat—it's not something I would say, 'Wow, nice,' but this," he trails off. "It was summertime, there was a bit of meat hanging with this big piece of yellow fat from the horse. I couldn't stand it. The guy goes shoo"—Moser waves his hands, as if whisking away flies—"and asks, 'do you want that?' I said no."

While working in Istanbul, Moser was asked if he wanted to go to India. "It was not the first priority on my list," he smiles. He had been here before, in 2010, and he fell in love with Goa, which he calls his second home. The Delhi food scene, however, seemed to him stuffy and dominated by hotel restaurants. "But then looking at it from a life perspective, and taking into account my love of Indian food, I decided to take the plunge." The decision would end up challenging Moser in completely new ways, while also pushing the envelope for the capital's hotel food scene.

"I really like to adapt to where I am," says Moser, who speaks with a German accent, inflected with an Indian lilt. "I've learnt that wherever you go, you will always be a guest. For me, it was always interesting, to see how locals operate, how does their life come together."

Moser had also learned that what works in one place may not be appropriate for another. During his five years in Russia, he was in Ekaterinburg—"just a little city in front of Siberia" and Vladivostok, "on the far end." The focus of the local cuisine was "a lot of vodka." Moser describes the typical table: "It's very heavy food, because it's very cold; a lot of pork shashlik, sausage, smoked ham; smoky, salted pork fat from the belly; a lot of pickled vegetables in the wintertime; they make very good bread."

Chef Alex Moser serves up farm-fresh food at AnnaMaya in Delhi.



Chef Alex Moser loves experimenting with diverse ingredients, such as *timur* pepper (left) sourced from near the Nepal border and Himalayan rock salt infused with ingredients like garlic, hemp seed and garlic (right).

On his first visit home, he tried to recreate the same feast in Germany. “I brought the vodka, but it didn’t taste the same,” he says, “outside it was not as cold as it was in Russia, so the vodka didn’t taste nice; the pork was not as good; my mum in the kitchen didn’t fit with the vodka glasses... it’s not all about good food, it’s about the environment, the whole package.”

Moser’s chef friend in Delhi warned him that the environment—more precisely the lack of a reliable supply chain—would be his biggest challenge in India. With AnnaMaya, Moser and his colleagues decided to tackle that challenge head-on, working only with local produce (with very little exception) and set up a European-style food hall to showcase Indian ingredients. Imagine a five-star hotel restaurant that does not, on principle, serve salmon, and you’ll begin to see the novelty of the approach.

Although Moser’s grandfather was a vegetable importer, he died when the chef was very young; India provided Moser with a more intense relationship with his ingredients than he had experienced before. There’s a wall lined with living microgreens, for example, which Moser was inspired to cultivate when he came across a “futuristic” illustration of a family growing baby lettuce in their kitchen. The entire kitchen team went to Tijara in Rajasthan to visit the organic farm that supplies AnnaMaya with seasonal vegetables: such as springy, emerald kale, and carrots as bright orange as traffic cones.



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“Everybody will tell you, I know my banker, I know my lawyer, my doctor,” Moser says, “we celebrate the opening of hospitals. But nobody knows the farmer, that’s the sad part.” So for the launch of the AnnaMaya in December 2016, the hotel flew in all the producers they had begun to work with, to set up stalls and talk about their work. Meera Bisht, a woman who infuses rock salt with local lemons and other ingredients in Ranikhet, made a particular impression on Moser. “She had never left her village, because of her cow. We found somebody to take care of the cow, and she brought her two kids—she was jumping on the king-size bed. It was her first time in a five-star hotel. I still get goosebumps when I think about it.”

It was because of Bisht that Moser stopped importing lemons. “She said they grow the lemons in the mountains. But no supplier was interested to go there and pick them up. Our whole mindset changed. Now the fruit you find in the hotel is only local.”

Moser is similarly excited by the *timur* pepper, a Sichuan variety from near the Nepal border; pickles and tea from the Nilgiris; and chocolate produced in Bengaluru from one of the country’s oldest cacao fields. Moser also plans to expand his knowledge of India’s edible landscape with visits to Kerala “because of the spices”, and elsewhere.

Domestic travel continues to nourish Moser’s body and brain. On a work trip to Chandigarh, Moser brought back six kilos of butter chicken: “I love good butter chicken—I’d jump in there straight away,” he says with relish. Once, when flying out of Delhi, Moser overheard a man making a big scene over being made to throw away his water bottle before security, then being charged ₹100 for a new one. “That was the moment I said, listen, we have to give complimentary water.” Plastic bottles of mineral water are available for those who want them, but AnnaMaya’s staff stresses that the water on table is double-filtered.

In terms of Indian cooking techniques, Moser is most keen on experiments with the tandoor. “We do a duck confit, for instance, in the European way of doing a confit in the oven, and then flash it up in the tandoor, which gives it a smoky taste,” he says. “If I built something in my house, it would definitely be a tandoor,” he adds, thinking back to his time in Turkey and Central Asia. “In Kyrgyzstan, they had a lot of old techniques, like doing bread in the wood-fired oven—for me as a chef, it’s always so exciting to see these places, because every cuisine has its origin, and there’s always an explanation for a dish. It’s the same in Indian cuisine.”

Moser has adapted well to his new home, even managing to dodge Delhi Belly despite his forays into local street food. Hopefully his travel bug will be content with exploring the subcontinent for a long while yet. “When I left Dubai, in 2008, the bubble exploded,” he tells me. “Dubai went down. I moved to Russia, and when I left the bubble went down. I went to Turkey... well, it was prime time there. Now I’m in India, everyone says, ‘Don’t leave!’” ✂