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# TAKING THE TIKKA APART

From deconstructing the chicken tikka masala to creating samosa-inspired potato mousse, Bangkok's top chef Gaggan Anand has made Indian food modern and molecular

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**T**he meal starts on a dramatic note with a glass of his signature cocktail mango mania coming to the table enveloped in a cloud of mist. Thailand's lovely Mahachanok mangoes are the star of the drink. Hot mango juice is poured over a mixture of freshly pureed mango and diced mango interspersed with a liquid nitrogen rum snow to release another cloud of vapour at the table. And it's not all show, the cocktail is divine with, or without, the rum.

It's taken a little over two years for an Indian restaurant hidden in a bylane of a posh Bangkok neighbourhood to achieve worldwide recognition. Earlier this year, Gaggan Anand's eponymous restaurant, Gaggan, was voted number 66 on the list of The World's Best Restaurants and was the only Indian restaurant worldwide to make the list. It was also voted No 10 on the list of Asia's Top 50 restaurants. Gaggan is being celebrated not because it's the world's only molecular gastronomy-based Indian restaurant but because it's a great-looking restaurant that serves great food.

The success of the restaurant has reaffirmed Anand's belief that he is moving in the right direction with Indian food. "Every dish on the menu is a result of scientific cooking," says Anand. He believes that molecular gastronomy can contribute tremendously to the future of fine-dining Indian restaurants since it helps to discard techniques and processes that don't work while retaining only those that do.

While the rest of the world has just cottoned on to Gaggan, the restaurant's reputation was already well established with prominent Indians like Nita Ambani, PRS Oberoi, Rishi Kapoor and Azim Premji.

No wonder then that the two tables in the chef's dining room which look directly onto the glass-fronted display kitchen are sold out a month in advance and most nights it's difficult to get a table without a reservation. At dinner there earlier this month, we got to chatting with a couple at the next table. It turned out they were Finnish and were returning home from a vacation at Phuket. They had stayed back in Bangkok just so that they could eat at Gaggan. Both the chef's tables had been booked by a prominent Mumbai-based hotelier.

First-timers are usually advised to try the 7, 9 or 10-course tasting menus which are a good introduc-



tion to Anand's modernist approach to Indian cooking. Gaggan's food not only epitomises the philosophy of molecular gastronomy that he studied at El Bulli, Ferran Adria's mecca of modernist cooking, but imbues its witty playfulness. A plate of amuse-bouches consists of a bite-sized tomato burger where a sliver of galouti is sandwiched between a false meringue of tomato water; *chanachur* of mixed nuts, *moong* and dried fruits in a pouch-sized edible plastic bag and a non-fried *samosa* using an air-dried *puri*-like crisp topped with a samosa-inspired potato mousse, fennel leaves and raisins.

While many dishes are purposely aimed to provoke

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at a molecular level to bind the molecules of the tomato and soy cream together."

The gravy is then passed through a special sieve into a homogeniser (a machine used by commercial sauce and ketchup manufacturers to ensure a uniform smooth consistency) and finally, it is put through a pressurising machine, and pressurised thrice. (A pressurising machine works like a foamer in a cappuccino machine; it adds volume to a liquid.)

"I haven't changed the recipe for the *tikka* at all; however, unlike most fine-dining Indian restaurants, I don't allow the *tikkas* to be made in advance, all the *tikkas* are made a la minute after the order comes in. So the guest gets a fresh *tikka* in a *masala* that is more flavourful than a regular *tikka masala*, and without its heaviness," he says.

For the moment he's put aside plans for opening in India later this year to concentrate on the restaurant. He concedes that the international recognition has increased the pressure to perform and maintain consistently high standards. "You have to perform



every day. It's become tougher. People become more critical. Look at what happened to Fat Duck and Noma (referring to the incidents of food poisoning which became international news). You have to deliver."

His dream for the restaurant is to reach a stage where he can offer a tasting menu of 15-20 courses and that all these dishes are memories guests take back home. "I have just 50 seats in my restaurant and my dream is to create 50 memories every night." ■