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WHEN YOUR MEAL IS A WORK OF ART

Galleries are collaborating with chefs to curate multi-sensory experiences inspired by the works of art on display

Noor Anand Chawla

What is art if not a medium of expressing human emotion? The origins of this truism date back to 200 BCE-200 CE, when Bharata Muni identified and collated nine specific emotions in a treatise known as the *Natyashastra*, collectively christening them the *navarasa* (nine emotions).

These were *adbhuta* (wonder), *bhayanaka* (fear), *beebhatsa* (disgust), *hasya* (humour), *karuna* (compassion), *raudra* (rage), *shringara* (romantic love), *veera* (valour) and *shanta* (peace). Since time immemorial, performing artists have employed facial expressions and body language to display each emotion vividly. The visual arts too have relied on them. Now they are also visible in dining experiences.

This is evident at the India Art Fair 2023, where chef Bani Nanda, founder of the Delhi-based Miam Patisserie, will "perform" her craft to showcase the artistic and expressive quality of food at an event, *Deconstructing Pleasure: A Food Performance*, for the Young Collector's Programme, to be held at the DLF Chatterpur Farms on 11 February. "While artists present their work in the vicinity, one can see a chef responding to the beauty around them. The chef assumes the artist's role. Gently building the opulence of pleasure, this performance by Bani Nanda transforms a chef into a performer. The chef constructs the idea of the evening for everyone to experience, openly," states the Fair note. Nanda will focus on creating dishes that allow one to eat with their eyes, while also observing the textures and other components of food on display. For her, every aspect of the dish has to be satiating and add to the final taste, so that it becomes a work of art in its own right.

Similarly, a showcase held in November 2022 at Hotel Le Méridien in Delhi, *Enduring Legacy—Navarasa In Contemporary Indigenous Practices*, attempted a confluence of art, music, dance and food. Conceptualised by Ashwini Pai Bahadur, director and founder of Artspeaks India, a platform that promotes the arts, this exhibition of paintings and photographs by indigenous artists, curated by Lina Vincent, provided a beautiful backdrop to a nine-course vegetarian tasting menu designed by chef Davinder Kumar. In a Kathak recital, Pallavi Lohani performed nine dance pieces reflecting each emotion sequentially between courses.

The green vibrancy of a deconstructed Patta Chaat steeped in the sweet tartness of a fig and jaggery chutney provided a tangible allegory to the dance depicting "wonder" at the beauty of nature, as did artist Jonmalagadda Niranjan's *Tree Of*



(above) The 'shringar' course, with 'anas halwa', coconut mascarpone and strawberry 'rabari', that was presented at Hotel Le Méridien; and Edible Forest at Grace in Kolkata.



Life, made in the *kalamkari* style. To invoke fear, Lohani took inspiration from Kaavi artist Janardhan Havanje's *Sharbheshwara* (mythical demon) as guests tasted a spicy mixture of cumin-infused asparagus cappuccino. Peace, or the state of being without emotion, was explored through the form of Ardhanareeswara (half man-half woman), both on stage and on the canvas in Suresh Muthukulam's *Kerala Mural*, as the guests savoured an orange and berry compote, signifying a harmonious mix of ingredients.

The same month, Sunaina Anand, founder-director of Art Alive gallery, turned to designer Pranay Baidya for the Delhi chapter of artist Paresh Maity's ongoing multi-city exhibition, *Infinite*

Light, which will show in Bengaluru later this month. Baidya, who had to curate a meal that reflected Maity's roots, presented dishes like Narkel Diye Cholar Daal (*cholar dal* with coconut), *kosha mangsho* (a traditional mutton preparation), *shorshe maach* (mustard fish) and *gur sandesh* (a sweet), made in the style peculiar to Maity's birthplace of Tamluk in West Bengal. Anand explains: "Food itself is an art. We wanted to tap into the *rasik* nature of both art and food for this exhibition."

"Food defines culture, and through its presentation, is a form of expression. Therefore, food and art are inextricably linked," explains chef Subrata Kundu of Grace, a restaurant, attached to the Emami Art Gallery and Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC), that has become a pioneer of artistic culinary experiences in the city. "At Grace, we touch on the emotions of people from every corner of the world. As individual pieces of art are experienced and perceived differently, our dishes make different emotional connections with foodies around the world," says Richa Agarwal, the CEO of Emami Art gallery and chairperson, KCC. Their focus on *sattvik* food made with local produce results in popular dishes like the Aam Tel Carrot Orange Pate with Sweet Butter Toast, which innovatively uses mango oil, the Trio of Mushroom, which makes for a beautiful edible forest, and the Kalo Chaler Payesh, made with local black rice.

Meena Bhatia, vice-president and general manager of Le Méridien, summarises the appeal of art-based dining experiences. "Just as art, music and dance are a great way to express human emotions, the science of cooking food, which stimulates visually through plating and tangibly through taste, is equally an expression of human sensibilities and emotions."

Noor Anand Chawla writes on lifestyle.

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