

# InVogue

CUISINE

## HAUTE SPA PLATTER, ANYONE?



**Spa kebabs, gluten-free coconut pancakes and guava gelato are essential ingredients of any health resort menu**

*By Kavitha Srinivasa*

**I**F you thought spa cuisine was bland and boring with a cucumber salad being the most exciting dish to tickle your taste buds, think again. Now you can have everything from guava gelato, to gluten-free coconut pancakes and even spa kebabs. It's not just your health, but also your palate which is being taken care of by master chefs who are going all out to whip up the most delectable cuisine, resulting in unknown dishes and unimaginable food pairings.

The accent is on wellness and the trick lies in tweaking the dish to give it a well-balanced flavour. Even your ordinary sandwich is not spared. "A pork and ham sandwich which is high in saturated fat, is replaced with ostrich

or turkey ham and bacon which is comparatively leaner and healthier," explains Mir Zafar Ali, the executive chef at The Leela Palace hotel in Udaipur. Likewise, a dish that requires butter is substituted with a low-fat variant or olive oil.

Ali's platter generously uses herbs, baby carrots, beetroot, turnips, tomatoes, basil and mint, among others. "If planned well, a spa menu can be nutritionally well-balanced, low in fat, rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. It also offers the required hydration and does not use any artificial or synthetic ingredient. Usually, it is freshly prepared and served," explains Sheela Krishnaswamy, a Bangalore-based diet, nutrition and wellness consultant.

Nevertheless, the same spices and herbs used for regular cooking can make a spa menu palatable and healthy. Then comes a hint of innovation, as spa chefs try out fresh combinations with vegetables, fruit, sprouts and grains, adding variety and colour. Till Kapil Middha stepped on to the scene, spa kebabs were probably unheard of. The executive chef and co-owner of Ambrosia, the health café at Amatra, a day spa in Delhi, concocted basil and olive oil chicken tikka

**THE LEELA PALACE  
UDAIPUR**  
Spa seafood sampler with pickled beetroot chutney



**NIRVANA SPA  
PUNE**  
Corn pea cakes served with tomato compoto along with a medley of fresh fruit



PHOTOGRAPH: RITESH SHARMA; MODEL: PRETTY AGGARWAL; LOCATION: AMATRA, ASHOKA HOTEL

and served with roasted pineapple and basil. There is also the salmon tikka, as salmon is a rich source of omega 3 and helps in lowering cholesterol.

"From appetisers to desserts, we have a complete menu, and many dishes are Indian fusion food. We have a whole-wheat thin crust pizza. In place of a cheese topping, diners can choose a vegetable topping or even a *chaat*," describes Middha. Yoghurt becomes the pizza dressing instead of the regular mayonnaise. Most of his clients relax at the spa and chomp their way through detox dishes like tomato and jasmine tea soup paired with whole-wheat pasta and olive focaccia (flat oven-baked Italian bread). Another detox offering is stuffed bitter gourd served on a base of red wine, accompanied with whole-wheat *kulcha* or Indian bread. They round off the meal with sugar-free variants of red wine kulfi or guava gelato.

All through, the attempt is to give spa aficionados a bounty of delicious and nutritious dishes. "I was not focused on losing weight and did not hit the gym during my stay.

## SPA FOOD REJUVENATE OR CLEANSE THE BODY, SOMETIMES BOTH

Yet I lost six kilos in three weeks, just dining on what I can only describe as blissful food, and this was Indian food, comprising fantastic flavours and wonderful organic local produce," says Ro Barford, a guest from the UK, while describing her experience at Ananda in the Himalayas, at Rishikesh.

Chefs are out on a health mission, cautiously avoiding deep frying techniques to retain the essence of each ingredient. Along with this, the meal can be personalised to suit dietary needs. "For instance, a detox diet would consist of organic fruits and vegetables, water and a high-soluble fibre diet. The food should be easily digestible. Carrot, celery, lemon, ginger, gluten-free dishes, cucumber, grape fruit, apple juice, blue berry, oat porridge and flax seeds help detox the body. A detox menu would depend on which part of the body toxins need to be flushed out," explains Ali.

In spas like Ananda, most guests come with



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## ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS RISHIKESH

Salad of golden beet, goat's cheese and pecan nuts;  
(Below) Salad of prawns, mustard cress, avocado puree



specific wellness and health goals and stay for a duration, which encourages chefs to whip up delicacies. "The cuisine combines macro nutrients like protein, carbohydrate and fat and six tastes — sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent — in each meal," says chef Ashis Rout of Ananda.

His spa cuisine concept is based on Ayurveda that defines foods according to body types. Each individual is identified into body types like *Vatta*, *Pitta* and *Kapha*, depending on the activity level, medical condition and lifestyle. The cuisine uses organic ingredients procured from certified local farmers. A recent addition to the menu is *sattu*, a flour variety which is an energiser and body cleanser.

## AMBROSIA NEW DELHI

Peri peri paneer tikka served with tomato & mirch ka salan and sundried tomato kulcha



A spa or wellness menu is different from a regular menu. A regular one will consider factors such as the prototype of guests (psychographics or demographics), the location and availability of produce. On the other hand, the primary concern of a wellness menu is the individual's constitution.

In the Nirvana Spa in Pune, at a guest's request, coconut pancakes were made without gluten. "Normally they contain gluten, but it had to be omitted due to health concerns. Besides customising a meal, the menu is also updated every six months keeping in tab the seasonal organic veggies available in the market," explains Keshav Baljee, managing director of Spree Lotus Valley Hotel, where the Nirvana Spa is located. That's how they have created dishes like corn pea cakes, served with tomato compote and a medley of fresh fruit. Fragrant prawns — with rice noodles, cucumber and Thai herbs — is accompanied by fresh organic seasonal vegetables. The hotel also offers an Asian Salad served with coconut fish cakes.

In one way or the other, many of these dishes are sought after not because they are relatively unknown and carry fancy names, but primarily because they either rejuvenate or cleanse the body — sometimes both. Whatever the case may be, spa cuisine has reinvented itself into a delicacy with an appetising variety of soups, salads and organic dishes, giving it an epicurean flavour.