

FOOD

THE BIG FAT WEDDING FEAST

From tasting plates to food installations to sit-down dinners—the world's biggest food trends now play host at your wedding





IMAGES COURTESY RAKHEE JAIN

Remove buffet from your culinary vocabulary, at least in the context of Indian weddings. Consider, instead, food islands, sit-down dinners, theatrical displays, and bite-sized explosions of flavours. Indian weddings today are about perfect food curation, impeccable presentation, and, well, that element of surprise. How else do you make the food stand out, given that most of these grand affairs focus on Indian dishes?

For chef-restaurateur Varun Tuli, owner of Food Inc., who has done everything from putting together a fully Indian banquet for actor Dia Mirza's wedding to a coastal spread for a 600-people mehendi ceremony, the demand for homegrown cuisine was, and remains, the highest across the board. And this poses a challenge. Enter: Global food trends that elevate local staples like butter chicken or Agra paranthas to gourmand standards. Thematic menus and matching décor, tasting portions, and formal table-service dinners do just that.

"The idea is to make food experiential for a guest, so they decide to eat at your wedding as opposed to the five others they may have to attend that night," says London-based food stylist Rakhee Jain, who has studied architecture and interior design. "Caterers often feel they're busy with food production, while planners think styling is food-related so it's not under their purview. Passing the buck makes it difficult to coordinate." But a year into her business, her clients include Usha Mittal and mining magnate Pramod Agarwal. She's done crumbling ruins and broken pillars of resin to display food at a Roman mythology event; dishes on reindeers, on little rabbits, on large spoons at an Alice in Wonderland enchanted garden party. Tuli has created ingredient-specific counters—chilli, dairy, greens, fruit, flowers, dessert. From grass in the dairy section to evoke the sense of cows grazing, to 25 varieties of chillis, the setup became as much about the story as it was about the food.

The sudden frenzy over food and how it should look isn't just about making a statement. Sure, that plays a big part, but there's more. The role of décor itself is exponential, to the extent that designers like Rohit Bal, JJ Valaya, and Abu Jani-Sandeep Khosla have also entered the business. Scenographer Sumant Jaikishan has even created alternate universes of jazz bars, the Orient, or Cirque du Soleil at his venues. The attention to detail now is like never before, so how can food be left behind? Besides, with week-long celebrations, the pressure to shake things up comes from your own wedding as well.







"Every client wants something different from what they may have seen at another wedding, so they spend more on food concepts," says Andy Verma, who oversees the Indian division at Admirable Crichton, a UK-based event planning company that has held a Royal Warrant for the Prince of Wales since 2002 and operates worldwide. He looks at mood boards and colour palettes, god forbid they use lilac flowers on the table if the décor is blue. And delves deep into the theme, even something as clear as the British Raj: Galouti kebabs with a twist (rajma or avocado) for a client from UP, slow-cooked game meat for one from Punjab (inspired by Maharaja Bhupinder Singh from the house of Patiala), and a take on the Gaekwads for Gujaratis. Then the opulent visuals, like glass jars filled with crystals and strands of fake pearls. For business tycoon Sajjan Jindal's daughter's wedding, he flew to Benaras and had a Rajasthani *karigar* make *matkas* with English designs. He then carried thousands of them to Florence.

Surprisingly, these aren't the biggest issues. In the face of family involvement (read interference), flying out a *paanwala* to Italy from Kolkata with all his paraphernalia is quite manageable. "Mood boards change 10 times and last minute requests throw planning out the window," he says.

Often the trends most coveted are difficult to incorporate in a wedding where the guest list is several hundred people (that, too, is relatively small). Chef Manish Mehrotra of Indian Accent, who's also at the helm of its catering, says sit-down dinners give people innovation along with safe options, food that everyone will eat. The caveat: They organise these for small groups. Verma, however, has catered up to a thousand people—from an amuse bouche to a main course of, say, tandoori Creshingham duck with jus. Indians, apparently, can be persuaded to eat early, and at the same time. But working around dietary restrictions of Jains or the gluten free is another matter.

An offshoot of seated small plates comes in the form of miniature dishes that pack a punch in just a few bites. Think beyond jalapeño poppers and chicken tikka. "You could do something beautiful with a bit of bater masala and a wedge of bhindi naan, the green contrasting against the yellow-orange of the bater. Add a little biryani with fried onions and a piece of black pepper papad," says Verma. "People like grazing bowls that titillate their taste buds without eating too much at a time." Mehrotra, too, does tiny phulka tacos. Good things come in small packages—unless it's the Indian wedding extravaganza.■

By Esha Mahajan