

FOOD STYLIST **RAKHEE JAIN** ON CURATING MENUS FOR THE MODERN, MINDFUL COUPLE

Whether they are high-profile or budget weddings, the alchemy of love in marriages compels everyone to embrace life once again, initiating new chapters. The beginning of these chapters are now created by extremely talented professionals who leave no stone unturned to churn out an extraordinary experience. The wedding industry has grown by leaps and bounds in this decade. Gone are the days of the tent *wallahs* and *halwais*. Instead, the influx of wedding planners, designers, consultants and curators have perked up thematic decor, floral installations and lighting design to an all-new magical level. This evolution has organically engendered the wedding food space towards embracing modern formats to blend in seamlessly with the rest of the paraphernalia.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The menu is an intrinsic part of any wedding affair. A very positive trend in vogue now entails conscientious couples looking for ways to minimise their wedding's environmental and ethical impact, especially when it comes to this critical food space. Obviously, making such sustainable choices for the D-Day does not mean sacrificing on style or opulence.

Having had the privilege of working with so many different planners, designers, chefs and curating dining experiences for top-of-the-line weddings for almost a decade now, it is very heartening for me to note the bride and groom of today are ready to break away from tradition and stand up for what they really believe in instead of going through the motions just to appease the community. Gender neutrality, individuality and maintaining a high level of sustainability have emerged as the new order of the day.





CUE FOR AVOIDING QUEUE

Not so long ago, lavish weddings implied a preparation of approximately 600meters of laid-out food — so much so that the guests could not consume it. Now, the smarter option is to invest that money in the services of specialty chefs — a perfect recipe to create a masterchef experience! Although the menu size becomes smaller, the signature dish, especially curated by the celebrity chefs, tantalises your taste buds with an experience of a lifetime, not to mention, less oily and healthier food options plated beautifully to add a touch of class to the entire wedding extravaganza.

Our modern sensibilities have facilitated the buffet queue to be replaced by restaurant-style dining. Wedding in the near future will witness the large buffet spreads been taken over by branded pop-up restaurants. The modern wedding diktat is to not hold heavy plates but to sit down and enjoy a smaller curated menu, complete with impeccable and personalised table service.







With people travelling and learning more about the world, weddings nowadays are also modernised to accommodate pertinent concepts of zero-waste and sustainability.

VARIOUS VENUES, VARIOUS MENUS

With more disposable income and evolved palates, more and more young couples today are opting for destination weddings. A food stylist takes centre stage in such occasions by adding value to the venue by utilising it in many unconventional ways. This helps in creating the perfect dining ambience, making food layouts interesting and Instagrammable.

The menu is created according to the location, theme and time of the event, bearing in mind the location constraints. For example, if it is in Rajasthan's dunes, a bohemian dining style — which is a far cry from the normal buffet arrangement — where all the guests wine and dine together, has proved to be a huge success story. The new trend signifies global cuisine to be distributed evenly across all the days of the celebration so that the wedding party enjoys a new cuisine every day. For most weddings, Indian food is mandatory on the menu for every meal, keeping the variegated generations in mind. In my experience it has always been a success story when desi cuisine is regionally divided on different days of the shaadi to pamper the guests with a wide array of options, ranging right from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

WASTE ISN'T WASTE UNTIL WE WASTE IT

Marriages are forever, they said. The waste footprints of these modern weddings are also forever, they never said. In today's age of consciousness, many families have now begun to recognise the environmental and social implications of these celebrations and are happy to make changes to the way they are performed. The young well-informed generation now desire to be "part of the solution and not part of the pollution".

Creation of a no-plastic planner or protocol is the way forward. We make sure everything that is made of plastic is replaced with bamboo, palm leaves and other single-usage bio-degradable options. Not only do these allow us to do our bit for the environment, it also maintains the hygiene factor as well as the premium look and feel. We also insist on no wastage of food through minimalistic and planned cooking. The left-over food, if any, are donated to charitable organisations to help the weaker sections of society.

I have always believed in embracing and patronising regional and folk art. This concern facilitates me to support local artisans — we personalise our wedding orders with indigenous products made by ceramicists and potters. This thoughtful endeavour provides them with a source of livelihood besides lending an excellent, bespoke and artistic ambience during the celebrations. Needless to say, following stringent hygiene measures is also high on our agenda list — it is very important for food to be cooked in a non-polluted environment, preferably in a covered and secluded zone and not in makeshift kitchens which lack proper fire safety system, drainage system and facilities for proper garbage disposal.

BREAK IT TO MAKE IT

In tune with the well-travelled and exposed audience today, this season's wedding food trend is all about getting creative and more responsible. The menu in intimate weddings is witnessing a shift from cuisine-based to ingredient-based concepts. For example, if our ingredient is potato, we graduate from aloo *ki subzi* to Hoi-sin Potato to even a potato au gratin as part of the same counter. The most trending ingredients in 2020 are white truffle, Mexican avocado, giant asparagus, pumpkin and jackfruit among others.

With increased awareness of the benefits of healthy living, many of the calorie-conscious young couples are also opting to leave out exotic meats from the menu and treating their guests to only vegan and Keto food.

Thematic presentation of the food serves as a great idea to convey the story of the bride and the groom and facilitates their guests to relate to them and their lifestyle.

Rakhee Jain is a London-based food stylist and interior designer. Follow her work on www.rakheejain.com