

ICONIC RESTAURANT

Sweet tooth specialists

From *puran poli* to *masale bhat*, Pune's favourite age-old recipes come alive everyday at Hotel Shreyas, leaving patrons with a platter full of memories

PRANJALI BHONDE

It is 6 am. Pune's soundtrack of screeching auto rickshaws and hissing buses is replaced by the sound of chirping birds and the chit chat of morning walkers on the empty Apte Road. The lights are on at Hotel Shreyas, one of the iconic hotels in the city, best known for its Maharashtrian *thali*.

People dine here with the kind of fondness you reserve for special treats, like an anniversary, a birthday or a festival.

So, on one fine rain-kissed afternoon, faint with hunger, I treated myself here.

The moist and melt-in-the-mouth *modaks* irrevocably carved a place for themselves right in my heart. As I write, my mind still travels back to when I stepped into the hotel to satiate myself with authentic Maharashtrian Brahmin flavours. Walking into the air-conditioned dining space, I was greeted by sparkling steel *thalis* waiting to be filled with food. Without much ado, a string of dishes reached the table – first the fragrant *bhajji* (fried onion fritters) and *papad*, followed by delectable *mattha* (spiced buttermilk), served with an aromatic *tondi masale bhat* (rice cooked with ivy gourd) and *puri*. The accompaniments to any self-respecting Maharashtrian meal – ghee, green chutney and *koshimbir* (chopped salad) – were served generously too.

The legacy

Started by Bal Chitale in 1966, this 52-year-old hotel began with a lodging facility at Deccan Gymk-

hana, Pune. By 1971, a dining hall was added to serve authentic Maharashtrian food.

"All recipes have been passed down for generations," says Radhika Chitale, daughter of Chintamani Chitale. In 1983, the hotel was expanded to include a multi-purpose hall named 'Amber', which was let out for weddings and parties.

In 1986, during Ganesh Chaturthi, the hotel began serving *ukadiche modaks*. At the time, it was the first hotel in Pune to serve *modaks*. They come with a gener-



What's on your plate?
Their team of cooks has been with the restaurant for decades, and each specialises in a particular dish
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ous filling of coconut and jaggery. They are prepared by rolling small portions of rice dough into bite-sized discs and filling it with a mix of tender coconut cooked in jaggery. The edges of the disc are then cupped in a palm and folded together to resemble a beautiful bud, which is then steamed.

"Our *modaks* have an authentic Konkani taste," adds Radhika. The hotel sells around 3,500 *modaks* on the first day of Ganesh Chaturthi, and 500 on other days.

On the menu

When the restaurant was first launched, it had only a few items on its *thali* menu – two vegetables, *aamti* (spiced dal), rice, *chapat* and *koshimbir* with an option between three sweets (*gulab jamun*, *shrikhand* and fruit salad) – priced at ₹5.50.

Now, the *thali* has expanded to include two side dishes, *masale bhat* (spicy rice), *bhajji*, curd, *taak* (buttermilk), *roti* and sweets like *amrakhand* (mango *shrikhand*), *modak*, *puran poli*, *ba-*

sundi, *kharvas*, *jalebi*.

Radhika ensures that dishes are cooked just as in a household. The dishes are cooked by chefs who have been with the hotel for more than two decades.

"Some have been with us for almost 25 years and each specialises in a different dish. For instance, Chef Yeshwant Salunke specialises in *puran poli* and *modak*, and Chef Ganpat Salve in *aamti*," adds Radhika.

The menu also includes the *upwasachi thali*, comprising dishes made of sago and *upwas* (fasting) *thalipeeth*. They also have a Jain

thali with dishes made without garlic and onions, tiffin options, and breakfast items like *poha*, *upma*, *khichdi*.

Loyal following

Shreyas is a staple in most Maharashtrian households. Be it a wedding, sacred thread ceremony, engagement or anniversary, Shreyas finds favour with most people in the city of Pune.

Varun Sadawarte, a localite, reminisces how he loved dining here as a child. "Shreyas was my family's favourite dining spot. Their *aloo chi bhajji* accompanied with *masale bhat* and sweets like *basundi* and fruit salad are par excellence," he says.

Patron Suyog Kankaria says, "Visiting Shreyas has always been a family affair, no matter what occasion it was. I love the *sattvik thali*: it has all the ingredients required for a nutritious meal."

In this weekly column, we take a peek at some of the country's most iconic restaurants

SWEET TALK

The origin of sweets in the Indian subcontinent has been traced back to at least 500 BC, where records suggest both raw sugar (*gur*, *vellam*, jaggery) as well as refined sugar were being produced.



Serve to win

Grand Slam champion and former World Number 1 Andre Agassi on his foundation's work with children, being brand ambassador for Lavazza and his favourite coffee



DEEPA ALEXANDER

Back in the day, Andre Agassi's incredible resume of an Olympic gold, eight Grand Slams and topping the rankings with 60 career singles titles was celebrated as much as his hot pink shorts and his mullet haircut. But since his glory days on the professional tennis circuit, Agassi has made the shift from enfant terrible to brand ambassador, from teen heart throb to family man and from long hair to no hair.

When Lavazza, the then 120-year-old Turin-based coffee company, became in 2015 the only food and beverage brand to partner with all four Grand Slams, it chose Agassi to be spokesperson. The partnership was unveiled with the 'I'm Back' campaign at the US Open two years ago. Sales from the outlets have been benefiting the Andre Agassi Foundation, dedicated to creating education opportunities for children.

Excerpts from an e-mail interview

during the recent US Open:

As brand ambassador, what values do you share with Lavazza?

● Our relationship has made a huge impact on the education of so many children in Las Vegas. Lavazza's commitment to what I am doing personally, what I value, has been remarkable. Its commitment to tennis is only growing. Our relationship has multiple wins for so many. I wouldn't be doing this interview at 8 in the morning if it wasn't for Lavazza, because I would still be sleeping.

What's your favourite coffee?

● I like about three espressos just to start the day; to remind me that every day it's buzzing and let's get after it. And then, a little shot of cappuccino in the afternoon.

Is there anything new that the Foundation is working on?

● I am expanding the Foundation,



Giving back Agassi's foundation claims to have built 83 schools across the US • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

with the help of so many, Lavazza included. We have gone from building a school in Las Vegas to building about 83 across the country. Lavazza has given opportunities for our kids to experience epic trips and learning experiences. In India, where I've been a couple of times, we've started Square Panda, that helps kids in their early childhood learn to read.

This year was the 50th anniversary of the US Open. How has it been special to you?

● I look forward to watching everybody else do what I used to do. The four Grand Slams have their own epic place in not just tennis, not just in culture, but also in the lives of all these athletes, and to get over the finish line requires something unique. I am not sure anything can ask more of you than the US Open, given the heat. If you can win this tournament, you can accomplish whatever your dream is.

● I like about three espressos just to start the day; to remind me that every day it's buzzing and let's get after it

Are you glad you didn't have to deal with social media when you were playing?

● Social media is a double-edged sword. If you have access to promoting yourself in a positive way, or be self-inflicting, you can do either. I am thrilled that I picked a hell of a time to be famous. Because, if social media was around when I was less aware of the consequences of my words or actions, I think people would think a lot less of me.

Could you pick one tennis great with who you would want to have a cup of coffee?

● I would pick Steffi Graf (Agassi's wife) because that means I would be home in a real world, living a real life. I am so thankful for it.

Your kids have the gene pool of two tennis greats. Do you wish they would take up tennis?

● Well, I do not wish my kids had taken up tennis. It's too late to ask what I wish because they're older; they're 16 and 14. We all try to break the cycle of dysfunction in our childhood. And I've done my best to do so in areas that I feel I was denied, and I try to be the person my father was to me in areas of offering strength. But, you do a lot more learning as a parent than you do teaching, and I am always trying to learn.



Memories of peanut farming

The pleasure of harvesting groundnuts and eating them fresh has few equals

SREEDEVI LAKSHMIKUTTY

I remember my first season of farming, when I ambitiously attempted growing groundnuts organically. The sight of mounds of groundnut plants on the harvested field, of women plucking the nuts and filling them in sacks, is still fresh in my mind. I had not realised back then, that growing this simple crop would drive us nuts.

When the plants needed water to grow, we had a dry spell, and when the harvest needed the sun, we had copious rains. But the harvest couldn't wait, so we worked in between spells of rain, bringing the groundnuts into the farm house: 15 women working on our two acres of crop. The women toiled hard at harvesting, drying and preparing stacks of the plant residue to be used as nutritious cattle fodder. Most of the groundnuts were dried and sent for making oil. Some of it went into making peanut candy.

Every waking moment was filled with nuts, and when I dropped into bed exhausted, I dreamt about more rains, nuts and snakes in the fields. We baby-sat the groundnuts for two weeks, which meant lugging a huge tarpaulin sheet full of drying nuts (easily weighing 100 kilograms, if not more) into the sun when it emerged, and dragging it all back at the first sign of rain. That was a particularly bad year of harvesting.

Every evening, after a hard day's work, the women collected their share of fresh nuts, put them into their bags and left for



All in the family Peanuts are just one among a vast variety of groundnuts
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

home. I realised then that fresh groundnut was a favoured food, eaten in plenty during the short harvest season. They told me to boil the groundnuts in the shell before eating them. So in the evenings, we settled down on the farm house veranda, and as dusk fell, we cracked open the shells with our discoloured fingers and popped the nuts into our mouths. I learnt that boiling groundnuts in their shell is the most nutritious and wholesome way to consume it, as it is rich in antioxidants and fibre.

Groundnut cultivation opened my eyes to the hard work that goes into my food before it reaches my plate. Knowing where our food comes from and being involved in the growing process gives us a better appreciation of it. The delicate taste and aroma of the groundnut oil, the flavour of the peanut butter, and the crunch of the peanut candy always reminds me of my nutty season.