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THE TASTEMAKER

From the stylish Indian Accent to the whimsical Chor Bizarre, Rohit Khattar's restaurants are changing the way we eat

George Bernard Shaw once said, "There is no love sincerer than the love of food." For Rohit Khattar – Founder and Chairman of Old World Hospitality Private Limited, which runs a popular performing arts and convention facility at India Habitat Centre (IHC), along with a host of much-admired fine-dining restaurants spanning as many as three continents, these wise words seem to be particularly true.

Khattar, the grandson of Tirath Ram Amla, who owned several important businesses in Kashmir, returned to India from America, hoping to open an American-themed diner in his family-run Broadway Hotel, at Aruna Asaf Ali Marg, in Delhi. He ended up opening Chor Bizarre, a restaurant that serves authentic Kashmiri cuisine amidst a charming clutter of whimsical bric-a-brac collected from thieves' markets from all over the world. This was followed by Indian Accent, a restaurant that combines the flair of global cuisine with authentic Indian flavours. Since then, Khattar has not looked back. In an intimate rendezvous

with Today's Traveller Coffee Table Book 2018, *Passion for Excellence*, this avant-garde restaurateur shares the secrets behind his success, his philosophy of hospitality, and his endeavour to stay at the top of the game.

The conversation starts with a discussion on his mantra for success. Khattar makes it clear that there is no magic formula to achieve success. One has to undergo a rather onerous process of endless trials and errors before getting it right. "Today, I feel that I am able to follow my gut instantaneously and take a prompt decision," says Khattar. However, he often finds himself repeating the same mistakes. But, for this maverick restaurateur, it is all about following your heart rather than buckle under market pressures.

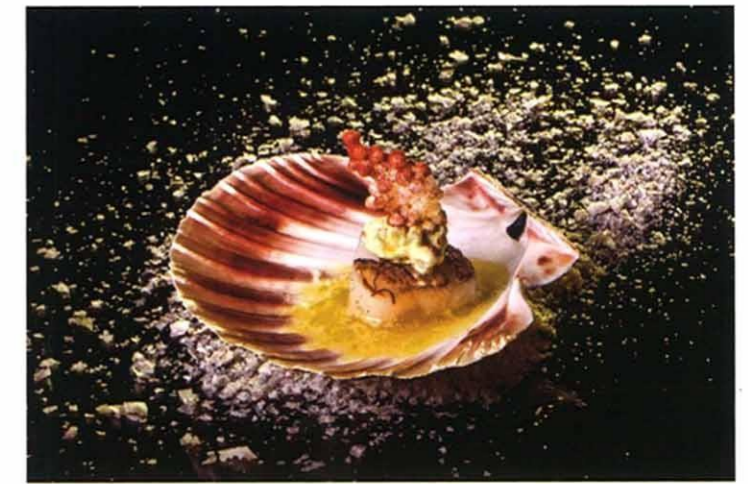
Khattar thinks of himself as a visual artist rather than a restaurateur. "I get excited when I come across something really beautiful. For instance, when I first saw the Manor Hotel in New Delhi, I thought that the idea of Indian Accent gelled perfectly with the boutique hotel. So I did Zehen – the spa located there. Similarly, when I first came across the exquisite Bikaner House, I thought

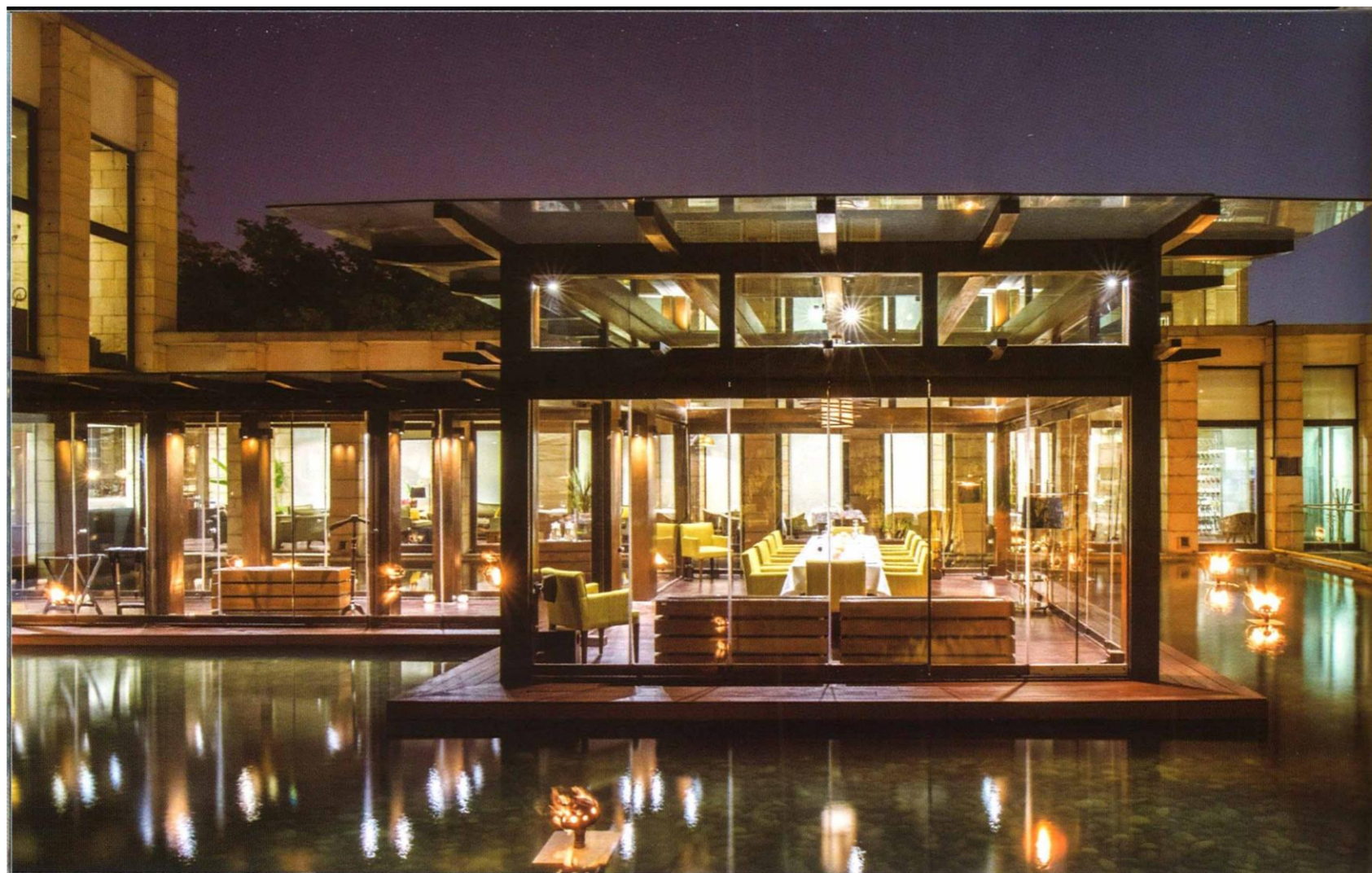
it would be the perfect place for Chor Bizarre," says the man of the moment.

Although he conceptualises a project right from the beginning, he does pay heed to the advice given by his colleagues. "I collaborate with my colleagues all the time. I have been blessed with an excellent team that has stood by me through thick and thin. Although I am not the best paymaster, I do provide my workers with a creative and collaborative atmosphere in which they can thrive," adds Khattar with a chuckle.

The conversation then shifts to his involvement with the IHC, where his company, Old World Hospitality, has operated the hospitality and culture facilities for over two decades. They have a 'Members' Club' with 55 Rooms and a range of casual and fine-dining restaurants. However, he assures that his involvement with the performing arts has nothing to do with business; rather it is a contribution towards the arts. "Barring theatre, which is also normally priced, all other programming is entirely free, which is our own humble way of adding to the cultural landscape of Delhi." It is this involvement with the arts that has turned his business from a run-of-the-mill hospitality company to an enterprise with a difference.

Clearly, Khattar wore many hats. When quizzed about his film company, he responded, "My grandfather had a





movie theatre in Kashmir and most of my childhood days were spent in the projection room. I always knew I would do something in cinema, although I had no idea when I would do it and in what form. So, I am very happy that in the second half of my life, I am able to fulfil my dreams."

When asked if all his diverse business interests require a variegated set of skills, he confirms that for each project he had to develop the requisite skills, which are not always there in his arsenal. He informs, "Till the IHC came along, I have only worked on Chor Bizarre, which happened spontaneously. When it came to the IHC, however, we had no experience whatsoever. So, we had to figure out the things which our patrons would enjoy and keep them going for so long. Most of our guests have been extremely loyal. Some of our iconic dishes have existed for years."

With a myriad business interests, Khattar, it seems, is hard pressed for time. He rues that he does not get enough time to spend with his family. "Watching films and travelling are two of my greatest passions. I like to sit back and relax. Unfortunately, we carry our offices on our mobiles. So, there is hardly a way out."

On the subject of his future plans, Khattar is quite clear that taking the brand, Indian Accent on a global scale is his utmost priority. "Although IHC has a wide variety of restaurants, our main focus would be to take our brand, Indian Accent, on a global scale," confirms Khattar. Fortunately, he is backed by his trusted chef, Manish Mehrotra, who has the uncanny ability to master

the nuances of authentic Indian cuisine and take a fresh perspective on traditional Indian dishes.

On the issue of whether with so much fame an element of complacency sets in, Khattar emphasises that in the highly competitive world of restaurants, there is no chance of taking it easy. "You really need to be on top of a project all the time."

There is no scope for negative publicity in the restaurant business, professes Khattar. "With the coming of social media, bad publicity can prove to be disastrous. Once, an expert told us: When a person enjoys a good meal, he talks about it to three people. When he has a bad one, he complains about it to 12 people. Now, with social media, negative publicity can reach thousands. We cannot afford that. So far the odds have been in our favour, thankfully," signs off Khattar.

