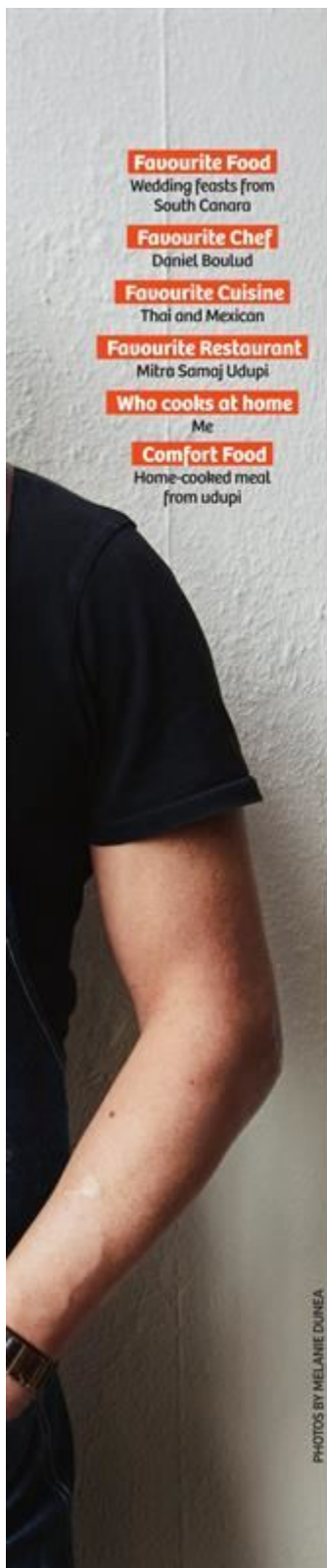


FOOD TALK

SIMPLE AND FLAVOURFUL: THE GOOD FOOD MANTRA

CHEF HARI NAYAK,
WHO IS HELMING
PRIYANKA CHOPRA'S
RESTAURANT SONA IN
NEW YORK, ON WHY
FOOD SHOULD BE
ABOUT GETTING THE
BASICS RIGHT





BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

On March 6, 2021, actress Priyanka Chopra-Jonas announced the launch of her new restaurant in New York City, Sona, on her Instagram account, calling it a space that was "the very embodiment of timeless India and the flavours I grew up with". Probably one of the best kept secrets of the culinary world, this restaurant is helmed by Chef Hari Nayak, the Udupi born culinary genius who has left his distinctive stamp in restaurants across the world.

Looking Back

Born in the coastal town of Udupi in Karnataka that has a vibrant culinary landscape, Nayak admits he was always interested in cooking professionally. After graduating from a hotel school in Manipal in 1994, he joined the Culinary Institute of America, New York, and topped the class as an Honors Student in 1998. Sharpening his skills working with chefs like Daniel Bolud, Marcus Samuelson and Albert Adria, he also trained as a pastry chef. "Coming from a small town and doing it all by myself in the pre-Internet days, going to the library and finding the best school in America has been an exciting and wonderful journey. It's been over 25 years in the chef's coat, and I am lucky that I progressed my career on the path I wanted." Interestingly, he never planned his career in terms of opening so many restaurants including Charcoza in Riyadh, Masti and Bombay Bungalow in

Dubai, Jhol in Bangkok, Alchemy in Bengaluru and now Sona in New York. "It has always been about what's next and how do I reinvent myself and how do I keep learning and I have been lucky to get projects that kept me going." And life has come full circle for Nayak as he came wanting to learn everything but Indian food to become a cookbook author of Indian recipes and someone who has changed the perception of Indian food abroad.

Taking Indian cuisine to the world

His latest project Sona in New York has been in the pipeline for over five years. "Maneesh Goyal, one of the founders and the brains behind this restaurant is a good friend and we met in 2015 where he sounded off his dream of creating this cool New York restaurant to showcase the beauty of Indian food. We wanted to change the perception of Indian food being heavy and oily to just being fun, inviting and casual and it was also something that I had wanted to do in New York. Priyanka (Chopra-Jonas) got involved in 2016. She is a good friend of Maneesh, and we met at a party where she got interested in the project and wanted to be part of it. I can say there is no better global ambassador for India than her in the Western world, so for me it was the perfect partnership." The team worked on menu development and several tasting sessions, including about 15 with Priyanka and her family before finalising the menu. It also saw delays that included finding the right place and, of course, the pandemic before finally opening

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doors. "When Priyanka announced the opening, it created this amazing buzz and the restaurant has been blessed and we are booked fully for the next three months."

Food Files

Having built his career on his unique interpretation of Indian food and innovative concepts, Nayak admits that his projects in every country have always kept the audience in mind, what would work for them and not just what he wanted to do. "My last project before Sona, Jhol in Bangkok came about because I always wanted to create a coastal Indian restaurant from my part of India where I grew up, so we did cuisine from the coast of India from Mumbai to Kolkata. It has worked very well in Bangkok as the produce that you get in Thailand, whether it's coconut, coconut milk or peppercorns, is so amazing. Dubai is all about glamour and Masti encapsulates that." Fast forward to Sona and he is clear that this represents him as a chef and his journey in New York and India. "We just wanted to reimagine the way

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people experience Indian cuisine in New York, like they have never seen before. The focus is on Indian flavours using fresh, local and seasonal ingredients from New York and we wanted to make it more vibrant, healthy and lighter, so that people can experience this more and come back soon. We have this simple bistro style, casual restaurant but elevated fine dining, techniques and my experiences in the Western world and my core of being Indian coming together. I have evolved as a chef and now I am trying to just focus on simple, clean and flavourful food that is not pretentious."

Food as it should be

The renewed interest and somewhat ubiquitous nature of food has also meant in a way that words like fusion food, molecular gastronomy and progressive Indian food have entered the restaurant world. "As my career started to progress into being an Indian chef, people gave me more projects in Indian hospitality world restaurant and trying to be innovative and modern was part of it. As I mature as a chef, I have realised that I do not need to reinvent Indian cooking and I have learnt that there is so little I know of the diverse cuisine of our country. Rather I showcase the food as is and plate it innovatively, so it appeals to a global audience." His food philosophy is simple as he says it's a meal that is shared with family and friends and must be something that you enjoy. "Whether I'm cooking or eating, food is something that you share on a table with family and friends, and it has to be satisfying to your soul. I think bringing everybody in a family to the table for a meal is the most satisfying thing," he signs off. **W**

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TRADITIONAL DELICACY: Authentic Indian cuisine prepared by Chef Hari Nayak