



DINING UNDER THE STARS

Alfresco dining is coming to the forefront in the post-pandemic phase as eating out in open spaces is preferred

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

From sidewalk, patio, rooftop, and garden dining, outdoor dining has become very popular post-pandemic. After all, the lure of fresh air and a cool breeze when you dine can hardly compare to dining in cramped and closed spaces.

SPACE MATTERS

Many hotels and restaurants have come up with the concept of open-air dining so that the outlet does not feel congested or the guests feel uncomfortable. The best part about alfresco dining is that it is cost-effective as investors invest a considerable amount for a restaurant's ambience, as the surroundings play a vital role as guests would be having their meal while connecting with nature and seeing the surroundings.

"We have opened an outlet at the rooftop of Mercure Hyderabad KCP located in Punjagutta, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, situated at the heart of Hyderabad, which is a rooftop restaurant so that our guests can dine in with good food and view from the top of the hotel. This kind of experience is different, and dining here automat-



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ically ensures that social distancing is maintained as our guests believe there must be special attention given to hygiene and safety. As it is an open space, it has a better capacity for the seating arrangement," says Soumitra Pahari, GM, Mercure Hyderabad KCP. Outdoor dining has the added advantage that it usually has some great views especially when located on the terrace of a hotel. Arshita Thapa, Director of Restaurants, The Westin Mumbai Powai Lake, adds, "Be it a sundowner with friends or a lavish weekend brunch with family, alfresco seating is always the preferred option. In the monsoons, too, we offer stylish canopy seating so that our diners can enjoy the



Gazebo dining experience at ITC Grand Bharat.

Al fresco dining at The Westin Mumbai Powai Lake.



Outdoor seating at Blue Bar, Taj Wentend, Mumbai.



Arshita Thapa, Director of Restaurants, The Westin Mumbai Powai Lake

weather in comfort and luxury. The team created the concept of alfresco dining based on Westin's brand philosophy of 'Eat Well' to enhance the entire epicurean experience to allow patrons to savour their meals in the serenity of the outdoors."

OUTDOORS MATTER

The pandemic put a lot of restrictions on the indoor seating capacity in restaurants to implement safe distancing norms. This led hotels and restaurants to innovate and look for new ways to increase outdoor seating space without compromising sanitisation and hygiene protocols. Alfresco dining was always popular among guests at the retreat as they enjoy the open environs we offer; however, post the pandemic, preference for outdoor seating has increased, leading hoteliers to expand restaurant seating outdoors. The beauty of the alfresco spaces is that they can be used for private gatherings on guest request. Himanshu Bhandari, F&B Manager, ITC Grand Bharat, Gurugram, says, "At ITC Grand Bharat, guests enjoy dining outdoors since the picturesque Aravalli hills surround the property on three sides. The expansive open areas in the retreat add to the charm, making it a truly unique experience. Guests can dine by the Ghats of Yamuna (our in-house water body) in their private pavilion. This location is ideally preferred by guests for an intimate celebration. This unhurried luxury experience is enjoyed best when watching the sunset over the horizon. Apart from this, our poolside restaurant, Apas Promenade, epitomises the 'unhurried luxury' philosophy of the retreat and is a celebration of the Terra Madre community's 'Slow Food Movement' (Clean, Good & Fair). The restaurant showcases local Mewari barbeques, which form part of the 'Food of the Aravalli's'. With a live kitchen and open-air seating by the poolside, it is a favourite among those looking to dine under the starry sky."

NATURE NUANCES

Taj West End is known for its alfresco dining options across its iconic restaurants – Machan, Blue Ginger and

Masala Klub, as these offer green outdoor expanse, also keeping the social distancing in mind. The legendary Machan's first outpost in Bengaluru offers delectable world cuisine and a novel repertoire of beverages in an ambience replete with natural sunlight and tall bay windows. "Under a romantic open-air pavilion in the middle of Bangalore, one can experience the finest Vietnamese cuisine at Blue Ginger. Our patrons like to indulge in delicate yet intricate flavours from Vietnam next to a water lily pool, cascading natural stone waterfall and southeast Asian gardens. Masala Klub holds the key to a repertoire of influences, a mélange of the best recipes from the north and south of India, adapted to a contemporary, light menu. This restaurant is visually stunning near a 120-year-old tamarind tree and serves up a stylishly crafted native culinary fare in a sophisticated setting," says Sandip Narang, Hotel Manager, Taj West End, Bengaluru.



➤ The Machan at Taj Westend, Mumbai.



➤ Ketan Kerkar, Executive House Keeper at Novotel Mumbai Juhu Beach



➤ Himanshu Bhandari, F&B Manager, ITC Grand Bharat



➤ Apas Promenade at ITC Grand Bharat.

While the idea of alfresco is not new, it has gained significance in the post-pandemic world for various reasons. Most indoor spaces have limitations in terms of seating capacity and proper ventilation. Outdoor spaces allow restaurateurs to add more seating areas while also offering the guests who seek non-air-conditioned and open spaces the psychological comfort of social distancing. Ankush Mukherjee, Director, F&B Service, The Park Hyderabad, says, "At The Park Hyderabad, our alfresco dining is called 'Aqua', and has been positioned as a poolside, open-air, resto bar with live musical entertainment. Located on the third floor, Aqua boasts of a magnificent view of the Hussain Sagar Lake across our infinity pool, complete with an open sky deck and cocktail bar. Internationally, alfresco spaces have always been popular, especially in Europe. However, the alfresco trend caught up in India a little before the pandemic, though Covid has fuelled its growth. Initially, it was to do with the fear of the virus spreading faster in closed spaces, being confined indoors during the lockdown, and working from home; now, guests find it very lively and trendy to spend leisurely time out in the open."

ADDING VALUE

With the advent of alfresco dining, entertainment has also taken a new turn. Many patrons are shifting from head-banging DJ music to a more soothing live band. The entertainment space has seen more engaging activities such as stand-up comedy, karaoke, and open mic sessions in an outdoor setting. The cost involved in the décor of an alfresco is much lesser than a closed space as greens and planters can be used to enhance the element of freshness and be easier to maintain. Rakesh Sethi, GM, Shangri-La Bengaluru, says, "Optimal natural ventilation and lighting are some of the supporting factors as well. At Shangri-La Bengaluru, we have kept the same alfresco dining spaces. However, during special occasions, we leverage certain areas, such as the outdoor pool space,



➤ Outdoor dining at Yatai, Shangri-La Bengaluru.



➤ Rooftop dining at Ssafron, Shangri-La Bengaluru.

where we hosted the loved-themed 'Shang Palace by The Pool' dinner in February 2021, which eventually was a crowd-pleasing offer for our patrons. This year, we launched the sky-high outdoor dining concept 'Dine at Dome' on Level 19. Guests can enjoy personalised dining with their loved ones in the comfort of a bubble-shaped cabana. Offering pick-your-own Asian, Indian, or European décor perfected with an array of menu selections and mesmerising city views, the venue has been a top choice for couples and friendly gatherings."

CUSTOMCUES

Alfresco dining experience, or dining under the clear blue sky or starry night, is something you will get to experience it all at The Leela Gandhinagar. In our all-day dining outlet-Citrus Junction offering the choice of indoor and outdoor dining, you can enjoy the hotel's architectural grandeur combined with memorable creations crafted and served 'a la minute' by our talented culinary artists, coupled with the joy of enjoying direct natural light during the day time. "Whereas if you are looking for a melancholy and tranquil evening setting, our beautiful sit-out area in the multi-functional first-floor area of the hotel offers an idyllic spot to witness the most beautiful sunsets. Our personalised expert service culture will keep you engaged with the view even more by serving delicious, tantalising beverages curated for the tired soul. Surprise your better half

with a perfectly cooked meal by you under the supervision of our master chef, and enjoy spending quality time with your loved one witnessing the historic central vista view at dusk from the ninth floor. With a tranquil setting that is filled with romance and charm, every day is a valentines' day when you dine by the poolside on the first floor at the Leela Gandhinagar. A scenic pool view coupled with exemplary butler service and exotic deliciousness will surely elevate your dining experience and etch in your memories a new chapter for your romantic tale," says Jaideep Anand, VP and GM, The Leela Gandhinagar and Mahatma Mandir Convention and Exhibition Centre.

MAKING IT COUNT

Now more than ever, outdoor dining is crucial to the success of food and beverage outlets, and hotels are working on adding new open spaces or ensuring new hotels have adequate alfresco options. Dietmar Kielnhofer, General Manager - Grand Hyatt Mumbai and Area Vice President - Hyatt West India, says, "Grand Hyatt Mumbai has multiple alfresco dining spaces. Pagoda, an open space of speciality restaurant China House, offers a majestic ambience paired with the signature delights of China House. Our iconic venue, 'Courtyard' with a 20 feet waterfall, is the most preferred venue for all social and wedding events and cocktail evenings. We also have a terrace for private social functions, which is surrounded by greenery and lit well with beautiful lighting set up."

Even if the weather is non-conducive, hoteliers use options like coolers and portable fans to ensure that the guest experience is not compromised. As diners return to restaurants, it has now become a mandate that safety and security are not compromised; alfresco dining is a great way to ensure guests enjoy a meal without worries. After all, good food is a good mood, and if it's under the stars, there is also an added advantage of making the meal even more special. The outdoors are calling, are you ready? ■



➤ Ankush Mukherjee, Director - F&B Service, The Park Hyderabad



➤ Rakesh Sethi, GM, Shangri-La Bengaluru