

Gourmet Dining in the Wild

Kitchens in wildlife retreats are churning out gourmet meals that are not just rooted in the land but are, in equal parts, delectable and drool-worthy.

By Bindu Gopal Rao

A wilderness kitchen demands a unique level of operational discipline.

As I settle into my comfortable chair at Maikal at Outpost 12 by Sinali Experiences in Kanha, a new luxury bio-lodge, I am impressed with a customised menu printed with my name. But there was more. The extensive menu had watermelon gazpacho, Greek salad, and an Indian selection of paneer butter masala, aalu tareko, gobhi bhujia, tuar dal tadka, jeera matar pulao/steamed rice, and tava/millet roti. There was also an Asian sweet and sour paneer (served with veg fried rice), a Western choice in black rice risotto, and sewaiyan kheer and banana chocolate pie for dessert. The best part was that all the dishes not just tasted great but were plated to perfection. A meal in complete wilderness overlooking the Banjar River, framed by the Satpura mountain range, came as an excellent example of how wilderness resorts are upping the ante with food to match their experiences.

Delectable Getaways

Good food is the minimum expectation when one plans a trip to premier wildlife destinations nowadays. Gone are the days when getting fresh produce was a challenge in these remote areas. Meal location also matters. When you are enjoying a meal under the stars or a breakfast with a river view, the meal needs to match up to the setting.

Durgesh Singh, Founder Director, Outpost 12 by Sinali Experiences, says, “Lots of local sourcing and foraging in and around the lodge by Chef Yogank and his team is done.

“Being a locavore is the in thing right now. We work on traditional knowledge of growing, harvesting, foraging, preserving and serving seasonal local ingredients.”

- Yogank Pranav

Nothing much but serving the best one can do with fresh ingredients. We don't depend much on the cold chain, which city hotels would have access to. Typical restaurant-type food can be accessed anywhere. We focus on offering as much local food as guests are comfortable trying. The Maikal Thaali, for instance, is a hyper-local food experience that is inspired by the surrounding Tilari and other villages where many of the ingredients are sourced from. Each dish reflects time-honoured recipes, shared by the community, which the team serves in a contemporary setting.”

Plan and Execute

A wilderness kitchen demands a unique level of operational discipline. Planning, procurement, and seasonality become crucial as you are balancing luxury expectations with the realities of a sensitive ecosystem.

“At The Serai Resorts Kabini, we work with trusted local suppliers and producers across Kabini, Mysuru and neighbouring regions. This requires our culinary teams to be agile by curating menus around what is fresh, local, seasonal, and responsibly sourced, while ensuring that we maintain the consistency, uniqueness and quality our guests expect from ‘The Serai Dining Experience’. We see this not as limitations but as an opportunity to build a more authentic culinary proposition, one that is shaped by the uniqueness of the destination, its landscape, its produce, and its



Durgesh Singh, Founder Director,
Outpost 12 by Sinali Experiences



Saibal Sen, COO, The Serai Resorts.



Yogank Pranav, Head Chef, Outpost 12,
Sinali Experiences



Pritam Kumar Sharma, Director –
Culinary, Black Rock Hotels & Resorts

seasons, rather than replicating the predictability of an urban hotel kitchen,” says Saibal Sen, COO, The Serai Resorts.

Twist of Taste

Guests are now well-travelled and expect a good meal as well as plenty of local elements to be introduced during their stay. Chefs are getting creative to maximise the usage of any ingredient and match it to the guest's palate.

Yogank Pranav, Head Chef, Outpost 12, Sinali Experiences, avers, “Being a locavore is the in thing right now in the wilderness culinary scene. We work a lot on traditional knowledge of growing, harvesting, foraging, preserving and serving seasonal local ingredients. We maintain an organic kitchen garden with the help of locals. 80% of our lodge staff are locals who are encouraged to share their culinary knowledge with us so that we can improvise on our local and seasonal meal experiences for our guests.”

Ensuring that respecting the ingredients and their long history of traditional usage in the area is intact, every dish is made with much thought. “You can't just put ingredients together and expect a fusion that works for all. You need to carefully pair it so that it stays close to its roots and still has a familiar taste and appearance for the guest to relate to it,” adds Pranav.

Vocal for Local

The culinary offerings at Aamaghati Wildlife Resort, Ranthambore, include a mix of local, Indian and international fare. The resort also has separate kitchens for vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes and takes sustainability very seriously.

Pritam Kumar Sharma, Director – Culinary, Black Rock Hotels & Resorts, which manages Aamaghati Wildlife Resort, Ranthambore, says, “We ensure each meal here is an experience. At Baradari, the signature restaurant, we serve a selection of international fare as well as local Rajasthani dishes. It is important for us to showcase local food, as this is well suited to our sustainability philosophy. At Johra Bohra, guests



Photo Courtesy OUTPOST 12

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Photo Courtesy Aamaghati Wildlife Resort

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Photo Courtesy Tathastu Resorts

All Tathastu Resorts across Kanha, Satpura, Bandhavgarh, Pench and Tadoba serve freshly prepared meals that celebrate organic and locally sourced produce.

Photo Courtesy The Serai Kabini High Tea



Dining is shaped by the uniqueness of the destination, its landscape, its produce, and its seasons.

can enjoy our signature drinks as they wind up for the night. The al fresco Badal Mahal restaurant is where guests enjoy a curated fine dining experience along with views to match. We also do a special curated candlelit meal complete with a floral-decorated table at High Point, an intimate space for special celebrations. This is where guests are served meals course by course, and this also happens to be the highest point of the resort, so you are ensconced in the nature and beauty of the forest. We also have a high tea ritual at our venue Naal Ghati, where we ensure local snacks are served."

Food Files

Food has always been an important part of any holiday experience. It has been highlighted in the wildlife segment only for a couple of years. In earlier times, properties were basic, and mediocre offerings were dished out to guests under the guise of limitations of remote wildlife properties. Guests were made to believe that it was the best possible under the circumstances and they would accept it. Now, with high-end resorts all over the wildlife circuits, guest expectations have gone up dramatically.

"All Tathastu Resorts across Kanha, Satpura, Bandhavgarh, Pench and Tadoba serve freshly prepared meals that celebrate organic and locally sourced produce, with some ingredients harvested from the resorts' own organic gardens. Focus on local dishes, styles of cooking, local masalas and items that are not regular in urban settings to make the culinary experience distinct. Many times, it may just be the simplicity of taste and presentation. Sometimes the story or history behind the dish is equally important. Sometimes the taste is enhanced just by using wood as the cooking fuel. Slow-cooked dishes

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- Anil Agarwala



Photo Courtesy Camp Tigerlily Dudhwa Tiger Reserve

Gourmet means using what the land immediately around and gives generously and treating it with real care.

take on a depth of flavour that guests often appreciate, and the kitchen production team takes great care to prepare each meal fresh and serve it immediately," says Anil Agarwala, managing director, Tathastu Resorts.

Green Cues

Today, dining at a wildlife retreat is expected to say something about where you are. Guests don't just want to be fed well after a long game drive; they want the meal to tell them something about the place that they can't get anywhere else.

Akash Mohan, Owner, Camp TigerLily, Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, says, "Part of that shift, for us, is also about how food is served, not just what's served. We've deliberately stayed away from impersonal buffets in favour of table service, where the chef sends out each dish as it's cooked and often comes out himself to talk guests through it. For us, 'gourmet' doesn't mean imported ingredients and elaborate technique; it means using

what the land immediately around us gives generously and treating it with real care."

They grow garlic, ginger, mint, coriander, cauliflower, okra, potato, brinjal, tomato, salad leaves and various other vegetables in their own kitchen garden, and their grounds are dotted with jamun, mango, mulberry, guava, chikoo, lemon, apple, cherry, plum and fig trees that quietly dictate the menu through the seasons.

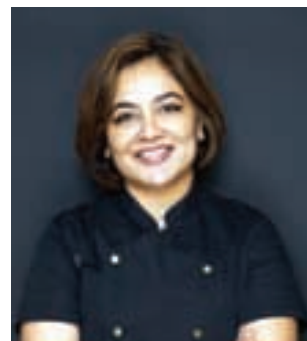
"Our chef, Suresh, builds each day's meal around what's ripe or ready that morning, rather than working from a fixed menu. We're also particular about the medium we cook in, no refined seed oils here, only cooking-grade olive oil or safflower oil, because we think a good meal starts with



Anil Agarwala, Managing Director,
Tathastu Resorts



Akash Mohan, Owner, Camp TigerLily,
Dudhwa Tiger Reserve



Chef Amninder Sandhu, Founding
Partner, Dining Experiences at Tipai by
Wildlife Luxuries

“A strong dining programme can add another compelling reason to book, influence repeat visits and introduce an entirely new audience to the retreat.”

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what it's cooked in, not just what's on the plate,” adds Mohan.

Destination Dining

The dining experience is no longer separate from the destination and has become an important way of understanding the landscape, its people and its culture.

“At Tipai, this philosophy comes alive at Palaash. We draw inspiration from the regional cuisines of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh while celebrating local ingredients and traditional techniques. An important part of Palaash is the women from the surrounding village, whose knowledge of regional recipes, ingredients and cooking traditions brings an authenticity that cannot be replicated. They help preserve and share the culinary heritage of the region, making every meal a deeper connection to the land and the community around Tipai,” says Chef Amninder Sandhu, Founding Partner, Dining Experiences at Tipai by Wildlife Luxuries.

The team saw this firsthand after launching Palaash and beginning to actively promote it. “Surprisingly, a percentage of our guests were visiting Tipai specifically to experience Palaash. This reflects a larger shift in luxury travel, where a strong dining programme can add another compelling reason to book, influence repeat visits and introduce an entirely new audience to the retreat,” concludes Sandhu. 



Dry Aged Saoji Biter, Lambi Roti, Live Pate, Wild Mushroom Glaze

Photo Courtesy The Serai Kabini

Photo Courtesy Tipai