

# HT City

## A Royal Repast For Pravasi Palates

Sourish Bhattacharyya

THREE YEARS back, when Sir Terence Conran was in the city, Rohit Khattar, the man who's turned the India Habitat Centre into a gourmet destination, asked the London restaurateur and style guru how he ensured consistency of quality at sit-down dinners for 800 people. Today, Khattar can give Sir Terence a lesson or two in the art of managing humongous silver-service dinners. For, he and his team of 15 workaholic men pulled out all the stops to make the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas memorable for the abundance of good food spread over five meals. It's the big unreported story of the three-day jamboree that attracted flak and praise in equal measure.

And they had just five days to do it, for the Divas organisers came to them only after their negotiations with a leading hotel broke down. "In five days, we had to finalise five menus with 500 dishes to be served at two locations that weren't under our control, rustle up 500 cooks and serving staff, and source 3,000 sets of silver *thalis* and *katoris* to feed 15,000 people who had 5 tonnes of fish, mutton and chicken, 7.5 tonnes each of tomatoes and potatoes, 5 tonnes of onions, 2 tonnes of rice, and 2.5 tonnes of wheat flour," explained Sandeep Tandon, Executive Vice-President, Old World Hospitality, who masterminded the entire operation. "The last thing we wanted to do was to lose. We aren't trained to be losers."

The brief they got was to create an appetite for nostalgia among the delegates who had come from places as far removed from each other as Reunion Islands in the Pacific and Taiwan, and Khattar's men, wearing the hat of Events Etc., did it with lightning speed and lots of imagination.

They flew in cooks from Gujarat and Rajasthan; they scoured the alleys of Lucknow for people who knew how



Rohit Khattar's win-win team - (from first row, left to right) Rakesh Anand, Shivanand Kair and Sandeep Tandon; Sanjeev Kumar, Vinod Bharti, Pratik Sinha; Sarabjeet Singh Walla, Tirath Singh, Manish Mehrotra; Shiv Kumar, Deepak Joshi, Sanjay Wadhwa; Arvinder Banga, Anand Dube and Manish Sharma.

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to make *hare matar ki tikki* and *palak patte ki chaat*, and they got cooks from Patna to make *litti* and *ghoogni*; they went to Meerut for *gajak* and *rewri*, to Agra for its famous *petha*, to Mathura for *pedas*, and to Bengali Sweets, NOIDA, for *tal gur sandesh*; they flew in *bibinka* and *dodal* from Goa, *khakra* from Ahmedabad, and fish from Kochi. "We spent a fortune on air fares. Had we another week to pre-

pare, we would have saved lakhs, but we over-planned, over-staffed and over-spent because we didn't want to take any chances," recalled Khattar, who shut his Hotel Broadway kitchen for those three days.

The result was that each meal had its distinctive personality. The opening day's lunch hosted by External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha had delicacies from Bihar (from *matar ki bedvi* and *dal kachori* to *kaale chane ki ghoogni*, *sookhi urad dal* and *litti*, of course) in his honour, and four kinds of chaat and Lucknowi delicacies extending from *gilawat ke kebab* and *shab degh* to *gobhi adraki* and *kathal pulao* for the guest of honour, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, whose constituency also happens to be the North's foodie capital. Adding drama to the proceedings was Lucknow's famous *patanguallah* and *Limca Book* record-holder Bhai Mia, who flew 150 tricolour kites on a single string. The beginning couldn't have been better.

In the meals that followed, the delegates were able to sample coastal cuisines - from Kerala's *appam* and vegetable stew and Goa's chicken *xaccuti* to Thanjavur's prawn curry and Nellore's fish curry; a Kashmiri and Gujarati spread - from *dhokla*, *khandvi* and *thepala* to *goshitaba*, *mirchi korma* and *tamatar chaman* from the Valley; a Punjabi, Rajasthani and Hyderabad selection - from *sarson da saag*, *dal makhni* and *machhli amritsari*, *lai maas* and *gatte saag kadhi*, to *goshit biryani* and *mirchi ka saalan*; and a send-off lunch featuring *ghar ka khana* paired with street delicacies - from *aloo chana chaat* and *bhelupuri* to *idappam*, *pao bhaji*, *baigan matar bharta* and *aloo methi*.

Khattar and his men proved that you don't have to be a pravasi to make the impossible possible. It's a pity the organisers chose not to share their success story with the world. After all, international conference organisers now have an additional reason to see India as a venue that can no longer be ignored.