



## rude food



# The Times They Are A-Changin'

*In the food business, the questions about what will succeed remain the same but it's the answers that keep changing*

**T**here is a story about an economics teacher who set the same exam paper, year after year. Finally, his Principal asked him if this was wise. Wouldn't everyone who came to take the exam already know what the questions would be?

Yes, they would, replied the teacher.

Well, then, how did that make any sense?

Oh, it made perfect sense, the teacher responded. In economics, the questions are always the same. But the answers are very different from year to year.

It is a good story because it captures the dynamic nature of knowledge and I guess it would work as well if the subject was Indian politics. (Each year, the answers would get more ridiculous.)

Bizarrely enough, it also captures my experience with this column over the last 18 years or so. The only reason I can keep writing about food, week after week, is because things have changed so quickly in India over the last two decades.

Those days, I find I have to grapple with all kinds of issues that weren't around even five years ago: is a delivery-only model scalable? Will all those little pastry shops run by bright young chefs survive? And so on.

And people I met when they were just starting out in the business are now established big names in the industry.

Let's start with delivery because that seems to be the subject du jour, of late. I wrote around a month ago about Biryani By Kilo being a famous brand that was created only on the basis of delivery. At that stage, I only knew the brand but I did not know very much about it: who ran it,

*There are problems with running a delivery operation because you either depend on Zomato, Swiggy, etc. or you own your own delivery operation*

## DELIVERING QUALITY

From biryani and *saalan* to *galauti* kebabs, the food from Biryani By Kilo is much better than expected from a delivery service

what the model was, how the food tasted, etc.

But shortly after I wrote that, I heard from Vishal Jindal, one of the founders of the company. Most biryani establishments used to be run by old Muslim families or at least, by established restaurant groups.

Vishal, on the other hand, had no restaurant experience. His background was private equity (he lived in Singapore for many years) and he looked at the food sector with the eye of a business guy not a traditional biryaniwallah.

He came to the conclusion that the QSR food chains that had done well were US imports like Domino's, which had swiftly adapted to Indian conditions while maintaining the best practices of the US parent. Was there, he wondered, an Indian equivalent to pizza that he could put at the centre of a new chain?

He settled on biryani because he thought it was a dish that was easy to make at multiple outlets.

I stopped him there.

Did he not realise that biryani was one of the great triumphs of Indian cuisine? Fist fights break out over which kind of biryani is better. Great biryani chefs are honoured and treasured.

And here he was, describing it as a dish that was easy to make!

He backtracked slightly and explained the process



### ASIAN APPEAL

Top quality food and impeccable packaging make Noshi quite a popular take-away service

### FOREIGN FEELS

The Delhi outlet of Royal China is more like the one in London

### RAISING THE BAR

The quality of dim sum from Royal China is quite superb

to me. When Biryani By Kilo started out, they secured the best recipes they could find for Lucknow biryani, Hyderabad biryani and Calcutta biryani (though I suspect that somebody played a practical joke on them while handing over the so-called Calcutta biryani recipe).

Then they created SOPs around the biryani – weight of the goat to be used, source of spices, marination time, grade and type of rice, etc.

They made the meat gravy for the biryani (and sometimes the rice too) at a central commissary (where they also did their own butchery from animals that came in on the hoof). The rice and meat gravy were sent to the outlets, where they were assembled and cooked dum-style only when an order came in. The process takes around half an hour. So they don't promise 30-minute delivery but say it will take an hour. But it will come to you fresh from the steam.

This contrasts with many traditional places where the biryani is made each morning in a large *dekchi* and portions are scooped out and reheated as the day goes on.

With the exception of the Calcutta biryani (which would get him lynched in Park Circus) all of Vishal's food was good. The *saalan* (made in the commissary) was restaurant-quality and even the *galauti* kebab was much better than you would expect from a delivery service.

If you invited me to your home and served me these biryanis, I would not believe that they had come from a fast food-style operation.

**T**here are problems with running a delivery operation because you either depend on Zomato/Swiggy/etc. or you own your own delivery operation. If you do your own delivery then you are in two different businesses: food and a courier service. Part of the secret of Dominos' success is how well the courier part of the operation is run. Biryani By Kilo is 80 per cent own-delivery and 20 per cent by other services but I imagine that the idea is to go all own-delivery eventually.

There are problems, of course, with adhering to strict standards. You can't always find the right raw materials. When I ordered, for instance, they said they had been unable to find goats of the required quality and weight during the lockdown and so, were serving chicken biryani instead. (I have no serious objection to chicken biryani but it is a little like trying to paint the *Mona Lisa* only with crayons...)

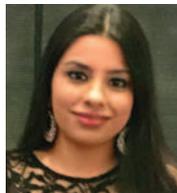
I thought the project (which is already flourishing with around 40 outlets) had the potential to really scale up. I am guessing others will jump into this market too.

Everybody is doing delivery now but two operations that really impressed me because of the quality of the food and the packaging were Royal China and Noshi.

Royal China is a group of successful Chinese restaurants in London, which opened in the era when Brits thought that a revolting deep fried duck with pancakes ("Crispy Aromatic Duck") was the same as Peking Duck. The group has many branches (and more than one



**MAN WITH A PLAN**  
Vishal Jindal, one of the founders of Biryani By Kilo



**WOMAN OF TASTE**  
Aashita Relan runs a first-rate operation at Royal China



**ALL-ROUNDER**  
Varun Tuli runs the Yum Yum Cha chain and Noshi, a take-away service

owner as far as I can tell) but the best-known restaurants are both on London's Baker Street where the dim sum are famous. For Indians, the brand has a special resonance because it is one of a trio of London Chinese restaurants (Kai, Hakkasan and Royal China) that have been kept in business by Indian millionaires over the years.

All these restaurants are now in India. Hakkasan is in Mumbai, Kai collaborated with Roseate for the opening of Chi Ni and Royal China is in Delhi and Mumbai. It is not clear to me how the Royal China restaurants are related (or what the link to London is) but, in my experience, the Mumbai avatar is basically like the old China Garden without any of the glamour while the Delhi branch is far better and more like London.

It is owned (under a franchise arrangement presumably) by Aashita Relan who was very hands on when I first went there a decade ago. Aashita, who was starting out as a young entrepreneur when I first met her, now runs a first-rate operation. I ordered dim sum at home and was startled by how good the food was. The packaging was superb and the dim sum recalled the heyday of Baker Street.

I met Varun Tuli years and years ago when he had just opened The Yum Yum Tree in Delhi's New Friends' Colony and he served very good Chinese food and even had a conveyor belt for Asian street snacks.

I thought then that his passion for food would guarantee his success and I am happy to say that I was right. He is no longer the slender, nervous youth I first encountered. He has grown in to a banquet-and-wedding catering mogul and runs a very successful chain of casual dining places called Yum Yum Cha.

I wandered into his Select City Walk Yum Yum Cha a few months ago and found food that was of serious restaurant quality. So when I heard that he also ran a take-away service called Noshi, I ordered dim sum from there.

Aashita runs a Chinese restaurant but Varun's range takes in all of Asia and I was astonished again by how good the food was. I am always skeptical of Thai food in India but his Kra Prow and Penang Curry were both very good.

When I put pictures of the food on Instagram, many chefs responded to say that they were Noshi fans. Matteo Fontana of the Delhi Le Cirque commented "I always order from Noshi. Top quality and impeccable packaging. You can feel it is safe and hygienic food."

My friend Rajen Garabadu who runs the production side of CNN News 18 commented, "The only place we have ordered food from since the lockdown – and that too, every weekend, is from Noshi."

That's the thing about the food business. Nothing stays the same. Biryani becomes a QSR delivery dish. Young Aashita ends up running one of Delhi's best Chinese restaurants. And Varun becomes a food business mogul!

The questions about what kind of food works and how to find success stay the same.

But it's the answers that change every year.

### ON THE web

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