

thereluctantGOURMET SHONALI MUTHALALY

Back to the basics

EATING OUT *Isha Life's all-vegetarian Mahamudra seamlessly blends local ingredients with contemporary cooking styles*

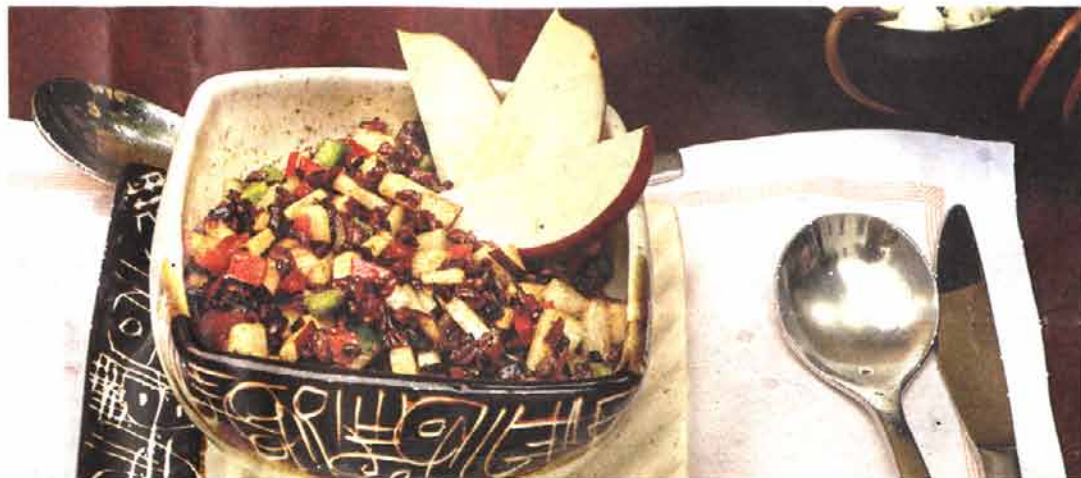
Let's get real. Caviar and champagne are so yesterday. This is the age of ragi porridge. Seriously. So, stop sniggering into your aloe vera shots. Wheat *upma*, *jowar dosa* and *bajra khichidi* seem a little too reminiscent of steel *dab-bas*, tumblers and virulently-chequered napkins for the today's high-heeled and well-gelled. Yet, even as *chai lattes* travel the world, unexpected *desi* ingredients are being rediscovered in hip new avatars.

It makes sense. Power food from our own backyard is far more reliable than all those dodgy potions, miracle lotions and unpronounceable herbs bouncing about the Internet. Besides, encouraging food miles in these days of Eco Warriors is getting to be as embarrassing as wearing fake Dior. Hence, our dive into this current morass of reverse food snobbery; rediscovering everything that our grandparents always knew. Five years ago, few of you would have admitted to even being able to pronounce '*kambu kanji*.' (Ironically, names such as Christian Lacroix, Jean-Paul Gaultier and Thierry Mugler posed no such challenges.) Today, as chefs and food researchers discover their

many facets and virtues, previously 'un-cool' ingredients are making their way into hip boutique restaurants, fusion food and sleek home kitchens.

This is why the newly-launched Mahamudra restaurant, run by Isha Life, is an important entry into the city's dining scene. It represents a changing Chennai, seamlessly blending local ingredients with contemporary cooking styles. They're focussed on working with locally-sourced, high-quality ingredients, the domain of mainly small-town home cooks till now. *Kambu* porridge, for instance, made of pearl millets stodgy with salted buttermilk, and served with greens fresh from the local market and pickle. Or, the more edgy, but still proudly-patriotic salad featuring a purplish-black wild rice sourced from the forests of Tamil Nadu. Exotic — straight from the backyard.

We begin with crisp *vadais* made with banana flowers. They're tasty and appropriately textured, crunchy outside and fudgy inside. A joia verde salad, a tumble of cucumber, broccoli, zucchini and beans topped with crushed peanuts, follows. Though the salad



WAY TO HEALTHY EATING At Mahamudra PHOTO: K.V. SRINIVASAN

twangs with freshness, the flavours merge into one flat note, which makes it boring after a few spoonfuls. The startlingly-anorexic garlic bread served with it doesn't help.

The all-vegetarian menu is brave, if sometimes over-ambitious. We try a cheese *masala dosa*, skillfully put together and stuffed with judiciously-spiced potatoes laced generously with mustard. They are significantly less generous with the cheese. Looking for it feels a bit like panning for gold in the Cooum. The Mahamudra special *dosa* is more luxurious, consisting of two *dosas*, one stuffed with a medley of vegetables and the other slathered with old-fashioned spicy 'gun-powder' perked up with well-roasted cashew nuts.

All the *dosas* are made with an

imported olive oil spray, which seems overly fussy considering Ayurveda has always celebrated ghee. Besides, given the cheese, chocolate and sugar on the menu, Mahamudra is certainly not aiming at being a stronghold of skinny cuisine anyway.

Their Achilles heel is this impractical desire to cover every base, from staunch traditionalism to health fad junkies. Hence, chamomile tea besides ginger coffee. They would be far more unique if they could firmly lay down their own rules, and stick to them.

Right now, chocolate-cheese sandwiches rub shoulders with ragi-wheat-soya porridge. Which would be fine if the kitchen doesn't seem so suffused with guilt about the vaguely-wicked ingredients they use to create a sandwich so

ridiculously insubstantial it could make Lindsay Lohan feel like Shrek in skinny jeans. Our meal concludes with a gorgeously creamy *phaalani kheer* featuring thick, subtly flavoured *kheer* afloat with plump sago, cooked till they blend into a pretty symphony. It's topped with a sprinkling of chopped golden-yellow mangoes, adding the necessary high notes that make it distinctive.

The setting's plush, the interiors are restful, the staff is friendly. However, Mahamudra's greatest ingredients are the intangible ones: patience, respect and responsibility.

Mahamudra is on Luz Church Road, Mylapore. Call 4353 5555 or 2499 1757 for reservations. A meal for two costs approximately Rs. 400.