

EATING WITH THE WORLD

As foreign food floods urban supermarkets and restaurants, Indians are pronouncing it right and eating it better

■ By Kaveree Bamzai

In a flat world, tastebuds travel more. From Ligurian olive oil to Kalamata olives, from Umbrian truffles to Iranian beluga, Indian hotels, restaurants and retail outlets are drowning in a melting pot of gastronomic adventurousness. From food as fuel to a sudden feeding frenzy of the exotic and the artisanal is a story that encapsulates the new global gourmet Indian, who travels as much on his stomach as his feet. Supermarket shelves and gourmet shops are now no longer an indulgence. With growing food awareness has come an understanding of what's good, great or just garden variety. What Peter Mayle once said ("there are more cheeses in France than days in the year") may well be coming true of India, despite the woes of ever-changing food notifications and an almost absent cold chain, which ensures even ice cream gets improperly frozen.

Food importers have now moved from hand-held plastic bags to Rs 10-lakh refrigerated vans. It's a mini-evolution. As Ritu Dalmia, chef-owner of Delhi's Diva restaurant put it: "People are not only ordering and eating the right thing but they are also eating it right." So out goes the Licia pasta, Kolkata's all-time favourite brand, and in come De Cecco and Affreschi. Out goes the pomace, which corporate executive chef at ITC Maurya Sheraton, Bill Marchetti, is fond of describing as good only for

greasing the wheels of a car, and in comes unfiltered extra virgin olive oil. Out goes processed cheese and in come mouth-watering delicacies like emmenthal and pecorino romano. Even in meats, which are subject to all manner of vagaries, such as bird flu, the range at charcuteries is any red-blooded human's delight: from veal carpaccio (though beef is technically not allowed to be imported) to gravadlax (Norwegian salmon flavoured with dill). As the rest of the world's markets plateau, the world looks at India as the new food destination.

It's not just a function of what Kolkata restaurateur Anand Puri—whose family owns the legendary Trinca's and the newer BB's—calls the expansion of culinary ideas, creating a contemporary food culture. As the gen-

\$1.1 bn

Indian market for imported foods and fresh fruits every year

43%

Income spent by urban Indians on food. Food consumption is growing by 10% a year

"People are ordering the right food, pronouncing it right, and even eating it the right way."



RITU DALMIA, RESTAURATEUR



eral manager of The Oberoi, Delhi, Devendra Sharma, says: "People eat at 360° and Travertino, and are able to compare with something they ate in London or Paris a week ago." Indeed, what the feet cannot show, the tongue indicates. It's also because the prices of imported foods, thanks to greater volumes, have crashed.

What's more, the greater the challenge from consumers, the greater the task for restaurants and hotels. Mumbai is dotted with deli-