

## In Conversation

'Indian restaurants lack in anticipating guest needs, an integral part of good service' - Raj Rao, Corporate Dir. F&B, Lemon Tree Hotels

*A graduate in Business Administration from National University, San Diego in California and associated with hotel chains internationally, Raj Rao, Corporate Director Food & Beverage, Lemon Tree Hotels, speaks with Rashmi Pradhan to give an insight about the food and beverage scenario in the Indian hospitality sector*

### **Q. What F&B trends do you observe in the Indian hospitality industry?**

**A.** In terms of product, there is no significant trend. Unfortunately, most operators are risk sensitive and do not gamble on innovative concepts. I find them to be too generic. Yes, this is perhaps required when you work with an all-day dining restaurant, but even if you look at the signature restaurants, they are, for most part, 'old wine in a new bottle.'

In terms of design, I have to admit that this has become much better. Hotels are now engaging creative design firms from abroad to create cutting edge interiors etc. Even the kitchen equipment is getting better. Unfortunately, in most cases, the cuisine does not match the design.

### **Q. Having worked with international brands, how do you perceive the Indian service standards?**

**A.** The service standards in India are good. Staff are genuinely hospitable unlike in the US where the service is certainly efficient but, I would say, they are not that hospitable. One thing which we lack in India is our staff being pro-active. We cannot seem to do this well. We also lack in anticipating guest needs, which is an integral part of providing good service.

### **Q. How can Indian hotels under the three-star category and below and restaurants improve their service standards?**

**A.** First and foremost, we need to teach our staff not to behave subserviently. If we can accomplish this, we can improve our service delivery. We must teach our frontline service staff to provide more anticipatory type of service, also to teach them skills on upselling, which many do not understand. It is not about selling the most expensive item on the menu, but rather to suggest complimenting items, that the guest has already ordered. Menus which have high profit margins but costs less should also be suggested.

### **Q. How important is regional cuisine for the Lemon Tree brand?**

**A.** It is very important. We take it seriously because we have guests from all across the country who would like to taste the local cuisine when they travel. We have made a conscious effort to ensure that we showcase regional cuisine in our hotels. We even have Jain food made with no garlic and onions. We will soon introduce 'Ghar Ki Rasoi' section in all our café menus, which will showcase home style vegetarian preparations. The reason for this is that food as an aspect is very subjective to an individual taste.

### **Q. What efforts have been taken to popularise the local cuisine through your property?**

**A.** We feature the local dishes prominently in our café menus. We talk about it to our guests and encourage them to try it out. We will introduce local 'tiffin' menus in the in room dining menu that change cyclically. This can serve both vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian food.

**Q. Please elaborate on the new concept you plan to introduce in Lemon Tree Hotels.**

**A.** We are in the process of introducing an innovative concept called Ramaswamy UK Returned at our hotels. As of now, much cannot be revealed on it. We have already introduced Republic Of Noodles, our signature restaurant, which is a South East Asian concept showcasing cuisine from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Burma. This concept has also been the recipient of many awards. We currently have this in our properties in Goa, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Aurangabad and Pune. For our upcoming hotels in Mumbai and Pune, I am currently working on developing new concepts.

**Q. Since Lemon Tree Hotels are located across India, how do you plan to standardise the concept and the menu?**

**A.** With the exception of Republic Of Noodles, which I have mentioned are in six of our hotels, there are no plans on 'standardising' the new concept. I do not believe that successful restaurants are ones that have to be standardised. Market dynamics play an integral part in developing concepts in any given area. In addition to Republic Of Noodles, we already have two very successful brands in our hotels, Citrus Café, which is our all-day restaurant and Slounge, which is our bar. Delhi, Mumbai and Pune will also see new concept restaurants unique to each of these cities.

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