

The Pioneer Fresh

FOOD | LIFESTYLE

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JANUARY 2026 | ₹50



Winter on a Plate!

When seasonal dishes
meet regional wisdom

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“Winter reminds us
that the most
meaningful food
is born not from
abundance, but
from attention—to
season, to memory,
and to each other.”

A Season That Knows Us Well!

January arrives without spectacle, yet with great intent. It is a month that settles rather than announces itself. It asks us to pause, recalibrate, and begin again with clarity. As *Fresh* turns the page to its second issue, I find myself reflecting not on arrival, but on momentum: on the quiet satisfaction of building something that has found resonance, and the responsibility that comes with carrying it forward.

Our debut issue, born from a meaningful partnership between IFN (India Food Network) and *The Pioneer*, was met with warmth, enthusiasm, and generous appreciation. That response affirmed what we believed from the very beginning: that food storytelling, when crafted with sincerity and rigour, still holds the power to connect, comfort, and inspire. At IFN, we have spent over a decade living and breathing food in all its forms. With *Fresh*, that spirit continues to evolve. Always shaped by curiosity, sharpened by experience, and guided by our readers.

A magazine, like food itself, must remain alive. It must listen, adapt, and grow. The joy of seeing *Fresh* take its first confident steps has been deeply personal, and profoundly encouraging. Your messages, your shared moments, and your trust remind us that this is a conversation worth nurturing.

January, in India, is a season that asks us to slow down and listen—to our bodies, to the land, to memory. This issue leans into that rhythm. We explore how winter shapes what we eat across the country, from the sturdy wisdom of seasonal cooking to dishes that exist only because the cold demands them. On our cover sits *sarson da saag*—vivid, resolute, and inseparable from its trusted companion, *makke di roti*. A pairing that reminds us that food is rarely about singularity; it is about relationships.

Within these pages, winter unfolds in many accents. We travel to Kashmir’s frost-kissed table, where dishes honour restraint and respect the season. We reflect on how rice, smoke, and tea quietly anchor New Year rituals in the Northeast. We trace India’s evolving drinks culture and glimpse the flavours set to define 2026—bold, bright, and unapologetic. And as vinyl spins its way back into our collective consciousness, we listen closely to spaces where music is once again meant to be heard.

Fresh remains, above all, a presence you return to. A place where food is not rushed, stories are allowed to breathe, and every page offers a reason to pause. As we step into a new year together, my hope is simple: that 2026 brings you tables worth gathering around, meals worth remembering, and flavours that linger long after the last bite.

Here’s to a year of good taste—in every sense of the word.

Raul Dias

EDITOR

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The content, images and recipes you'll find in the pages of *Fresh* have been created, sourced and powered by Team IFN

Contributors



MARRYAM H. RESHII

What's your favourite go-to winter treat?

"Plum pudding and brandy sauce. How could it not be! That it is eaten in a one week's span makes it somehow more desirable."

A food writer and food photographer since 1991, Marryam is also the author of *The Flavour of Spice*, besides having contributed to several books and magazine articles on varied aspects of food including that of countries where she has travelled to. Marryam divides her time between Srinagar and Delhi. [@marryam](#)

HOIHNU HAUZEL

What's one food-related New Year resolution that fails you?

"Cutting down on sugar—every year I promise myself, and every year dessert wins!"

A native of Manipur, food and culture writer Hoihnu has spent over a decade with leading Indian dailies. She has authored *The Essential Northeast Cookbook* and *Stories The Fire Could Not Burn* is her latest book. Her work explores food history, cultural practice, regional identity, and themes of resilience. [@hoihnu_hauzel](#)



PHORUM PANDYA

One home décor item on your 2026 wish list?

"A vintage bench—for conversation, black coffee, and senseless pondering."

This independent journalist and food writer swapped her full-time job for the "reckless life of a freelancer!" Terrible at crossing roads, she loves to chase a juicy story across the globe. She has a thing for quirky headlines, airport transits, quaint cafés and catching the sunrise. [@phorumpandya](#)

PRIYANKO SARKAR

What's that one cocktail that will define 2026?

"The Picante! But think more fruity and herbaceous iterations of it."

An independent journalist with over two decades of writing experience. Priyanko's specialty is beverages and he has been known to travel far and wide to drink local potions as well as their food portions in a bid to understand India's eating and drinking habits. He also conducts heritage walks and "moonshines" as a cocktail consultant. [@priyanko](#)



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and *makke di roti*

Photography: Vipul Varyani
Preparation: Swapnil Shinde
Production: Salil Dhurandhar

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What's "Wow"ing Us This Month!

Amma's Kitchen Comfort!

Karnataka soul food, Amma-led warmth, and all-day comfort lie at the core of **Bastian Ammakai** in Mumbai. Rooted in home kitchens, memory, and instinct, the menu blends generational recipes with familiar Bastian favourites. It is nostalgic, inclusive, and deeply emotional dining—where second servings are insisted upon, and every meal feels like home.



Wellness in Full Bloom

The Tea Culture of the World expands its wellness repertoire with **Blue Pea Flower Infusion with Green Tea** in convenient tea bags. Blending the calming beauty of butterfly pea with the antioxidant strength of green tea, this vibrant infusion delivers visual drama, everyday wellness, and modern convenience in one elegant cup.

Comfort, Reimagined in Marshmallow

Hello Mallows reimagines the classic marshmallow as a handcrafted, melt-in-the-mouth indulgence that feels both nostalgic and modern. Each pillowy bite pairs soft marshmallow with premium chocolate, creamy caramel, and a gentle touch of sea salt. Thoughtfully made using single-origin Indian chocolate, farm-fresh butter, and sulphur-free cane sugar, these treats are 100% vegetarian, gluten-free, and gelatine-free. With flavours like *Dark Chocolate & Flaked Sea Salt* and *Dulce de Leche & Salted Caramel*, Hello Mallows invites a slower, more sensory kind of sweetness—where comfort, craftsmanship, and dessert-driven nostalgia come together in every bite.



PANJAB'S WINTER TRADITIONS

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Japanese aesthetics K. Jo-Style!

OJU brings Karan Johar's signature flair into Japanese dining. Warm lighting, sleek detailing, and polished interiors set the stage for sushi, small plates, and mains that focus on clean, expressive flavours. The cocktails—especially the Japan-Peru Nikkei mashups—are scene-stealers. With outposts in Gurugram and Mumbai, it's ideal for date nights, elegant dinners, and anyone who loves Japanese cuisine with modern drama.

Compiled by Shreya Mukherjee

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Compiled by Shreya Mukherjee

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The **Wonderchef Onyx Brew Coffee Maker** is designed for relaxed, fuss-free coffee moments at home. Brewing up to six cups at a time, it delivers aromatic, flavour-forward drip coffee with minimal effort. An anti-drip system prevents spills when the carafe is lifted, while the warming plate ensures every cup stays comfortably hot. Its sleek design adds polish to any kitchen, and the removable filter makes cleaning simple. Priced at ₹1,449, it is available online at Vijay Sales and is a reliable pick for everyday coffee drinkers.



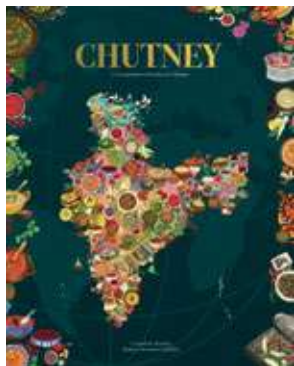
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Designed for modern living spaces, the **Eureka Forbes Air Purifier 230 Surround 360°** works discreetly and efficiently from every angle. Its surround air intake draws in dust, allergens, bacteria and odours, while a powerful four-stage purification system with a True HEPA H13 filter removes 99.97% of fine particles. Ideal for rooms up to 310 sq. ft., it features a sleep mode, adjustable fan speeds, a timer and a filter-change indicator. Available online at Vijay Sales for ₹6,499, it's a smart upgrade for everyday breathing comfort.

One appliance, countless comforting kitchen possibilities

The **INALSA Automatic Soup Maker** is a multitasker that quickly earns its place on the counter. With nine preset programmes, it moves seamlessly from velvety soups and chunky purées to smoothies, cereals, nut milks and even baby food. The powerful 1100W motor cooks and blends efficiently, while the 1.2-litre heat-resistant glass jar safely handles both hot and cold recipes. A soundproof cover keeps operation surprisingly quiet, and the self-clean function makes tidying up a one-touch task. Ideal for plant-forward kitchens and busy households, it is priced at ₹5,335 on Amazon and comes with a two-year warranty.





Chutney: A Compendium of Stories and Recipes

By Rushina Munshaw-Ghildiyal

Few cookbooks manage to feel like both a cultural archive and a celebration in one breath, and *Chutney* does exactly that. Curated by Rushina Munshaw-Ghildiyal, *Chutney* assembles memories, rituals, and recipes from more than 120 contributors to showcase the astonishing diversity of India's "chutney-verse." This book might just prove that chutney, a condiment overlooked, has more to say about our diverse traditions than any other. Part cookbook, part cultural record, it revels in the small bowl that transforms every plate, reminding us that the most powerful flavours often come from the quietest corners.

Published by A Perfect Bite Consulting (APBC):
₹3,500

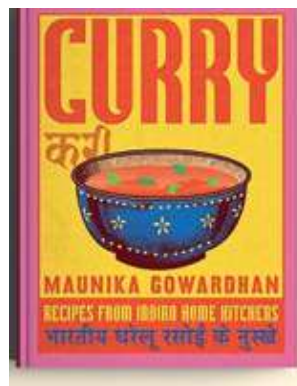


Aria and The Magic Apron

By Pooja Dhingra & Stuti Agarwal

In a world where baking shows make perfection look effortless, this children's book serves as a reminder that magic often hides in the messy details. Aria dreams in frosting and sprinkles, but reality usually tastes like disaster. Still, she can't stop baking. So when a school-wide bake-off arrives, starring superstar judge Pari Doshi (inspired by Pooja Dhingra, perhaps?), she ignores the fear and enters. What follows is a hilarious, heart-tugging journey shaped not by perfect pastries but by resilience, friendship and one very enchanted apron.

Published by Juggernaut:
₹299



Curry: Recipes From Indian Home Kitchens

By Maunika Gowardhan

More than a cookbook, *Curry* is Maunika Gowardhan's heartfelt tribute to the vibrancy and nuance of Indian cuisine. Organised by regions rather than spice levels or trends, it reintroduces curries as thoughtful culinary expressions shaped by crops, culture, and traditions. With step-by-step instructions, foundational skills (like making *paneer* and *ghee* at home), and deeply meaningful recipes handed down through generations, *Curry* gives home cooks the confidence to recreate authentic flavours and discover new ones along the way. A must-read for anyone hungry to explore India beyond the familiar.

Published by Quadrille Pub:
₹297



Stories From A Kargili Kitchen

By Yash Saxena

Stories from a Kargili Kitchen reframes Kargil not as a battleground, but as a kitchen where memory, survival, and love simmer over wood smoke. The book unveils the Kargil most of India never sees; one shaped by monastery fires, shepherd caravans, prayer offerings and family tables rather than warfare headlines. Structured as intimate food essays, cultural observations, and field notes, it captures the tenderness, faith, and endurance of people who keep identity alive one meal at a time.

Published by Penguin Random House India:
₹999

Compiled by
Shreya Mukherjee

Salt, Smoke & Winter!

In this personal winter food chronicle, *Fresh* Editor RAUL DIAS traces how seasonal Indian dishes—from mustard greens to coastal stews—shaped our palate, memory and understanding of time

I have long felt that winter is when Indian food speaks most clearly. Not louder, not richer necessarily—but with intention. Across years of travel, reporting and simply eating with curiosity, I've learnt that winter dishes are never accidental. They are

built on foresight, preservation, climate wisdom and an intimate understanding of the body. Winter in India may not look the same everywhere, but it tastes unmistakably deliberate.

Some of my earliest food memories are tethered to winter appearing quietly. There was no dramatic drop in temperature, just the arrival of certain ingredients. Greens thickened, grains changed, sweets grew heavier. The kitchen adjusted before we did. As a child, I didn't know why *gond ke laddoos* (made from warming edible tree gums like acacia, almond and tragacanth) appeared, or why certain vegetables suddenly mattered. As an editor today, I understand that winter cooking is one of India's oldest systems of applied food knowledge—deeply regional, fiercely seasonal, and rooted in survival as much as pleasure.

Northern Fires and Fields of Green

At the heart of this story—and fittingly on our cover—is *sarson da saag* with its most trusted companion, *makke di roti*. Together, they represent winter cooking at its most elemental and assured. A dish built on time, repetition



(clockwise from above) gond ke laddoos; sarson da saag with makke di roti; a North Indian winter special lunch spread

Did You Know?

Many winter dishes were designed to be cooked once and eaten over several days—an early lesson in efficiency and flavour development.

and instinct, *sarson da saag* speaks of patience and generosity—mustard greens cooked down slowly, flavours deepened deliberately, bitterness softened through care.

Finished with white butter and eaten hot with *makke di roti*, it insists on rhythm. You cannot hurry it, and it will not appear out of season. This is cooking governed by daylight, temperature and instinct—where the meal waits until the season is ready.

Carrots, too, wait for winter to reveal themselves. *Gajar ka halwa* made from tender red carrots is an exercise in

slow indulgence. Milk reduces, sugar deepens, ghee carries aroma. A lesser-known detail: this *halwa* was once considered strengthening food, often eaten warm in small portions rather than as dessert.

Further west, Gujarat's *undhiyu* celebrates winter abundance. Cooked traditionally in earthen pots, vegetables layered rather than stirred, it mirrors the agricultural calendar. Fresh *tuvar*, green garlic, yam and fenugreek dumplings come together in a dish that is eaten outdoors as often as indoors—proof that winter in much of India is as social as it is seasonal.

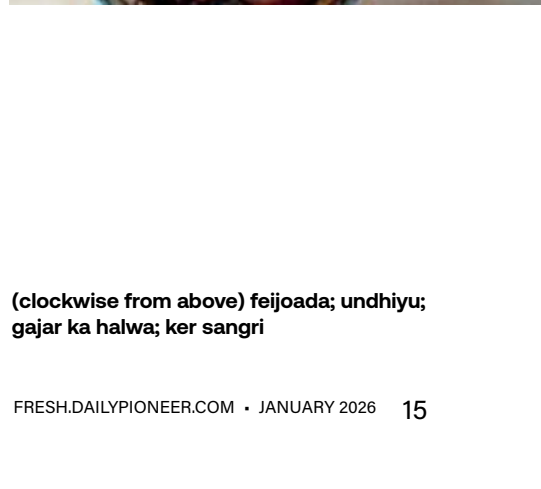
Desert Wisdom

Rajasthan, where my mother grew up, taught me early on that winter food doesn't require abundance—it requires intelligence. *Ker sangri*, made from dried desert berries (*ker*) and beans (*sangri*), is not merely a dish but a culinary philosophy. Harvested in the arid months, sun-dried, stored and rehydrated in winter, it is seasoned with restraint yet confidence—yoghurt, dried chillies, cumin, a touch of *amchur*. No excess, no garnish. Just flavour extracted through technique.

What makes *ker sangri* remarkable is its defiance of environment. In a land where fresh produce is unreliable, preservation becomes power. Winter is when these stores are honoured. I have eaten *ker sangri* in modest homes and heritage hotels, each version tasting slightly different, yet always unmistakably Rajasthani—salty, sharp, deeply savoury. It is a dish that doesn't apologise for its austerity, and perhaps that is why it feels so modern today.

Western Coasts and Stored Abundance

If Rajasthan's winter food is about survival, the western coast's is about timing. In Goa and the Konkan, winter arrives with a certain confidence. Dishes like chicken *cafreal* and the pork and beans stew *feijoada* take center stage, not because they are heavy, but because the season allows them to mature.



(clockwise from above) feijoada; undhiyu; gajar ka halwa; ker sangri





(clockwise from above) sattu sharbat; chicken cafreal; poha with jalebi; ukdiche modak



Cafreal, in particular, holds my attention for the history it carries as much as the flavour it delivers. Green with coriander, garlic and spice, it is a dish that speaks of movement across oceans. Its roots lie in Mozambique, carried to Goa through the shared routes of the Portuguese empire, where it found a second home and a local accent. What fascinates me is how seamlessly it adapted—fiery yet herbaceous, familiar yet foreign. *Cafreal* is not just a recipe but a reminder that winter food in Goa is often layered with memory, migration and colonial exchange, where two distant kitchens continue to speak the same language of spice and heat.

Maharashtra's winters are gentler but no less intentional. *Valache birde*, made from hyacinth beans available only briefly, is a reminder that seasonality doesn't always announce itself loudly. *Bhutte ka kees*, grated corn cooked with milk and tempered simply, appears and disappears with the cold. Miss it once, and you wait another year.

Breakfasts change too. *Poha* with *jalebi*, eaten steaming hot, makes sense only when mornings are crisp. *Ukdiche modak*, steamed rather than fried, offer warmth without heaviness—coconut and jaggery providing comfort rather than excess.

Across these regions, winter cooking reveals a shared understanding: that food must respond to both climate and calendar. Stored ingredients, preserved techniques, delayed gratification—these are not trends, but inherited wisdom.

WINTER WARMERS

Across India, these winter drinks lean towards nourishment over novelty...

Kaanji

Fermented black carrot drink with mustard; warming and probiotic

Sattu Sharbat

Roasted gram flour mixed with water, lemon and spices; deeply nourishing

Masala Doodh

Hot milk flavoured with nuts, saffron and warming spices

Ragi Malt

Finger millet drink, lightly sweet or savoury, sustaining in cold months

Badam Milk

Almond-rich hot milk popular across western India

Ginger-Jaggery Water

Simple, restorative and commonly sipped in the mornings

Panakam (winter version)

Jaggery, ginger and pepper drink adapted for cooler weather



Winter Pantry Across India

Dried berries and beans, mustard greens, red carrots, sesame, jaggery, millets, peppercorns, edible gum.

Gentle Heat of the South

Winter in the south is often misunderstood as negligible. Yet its food tells a quieter, more nuanced story. Here, warmth is built through spice, grain and texture rather than fat.

Ragi mudde exemplifies this. Dense, grounding, deeply nourishing, it is winter food not because of temperature alone, but because bodies crave stability. Pepper-forward gravies accompany it, delivering heat that warms from within.

Pepper dominates many southern winter dishes. *Milagu kuzhambu* and *kozhi rasam* rely on its sharp, lingering warmth. These are foods that blur the line between nourishment and remedy, eaten as much for prevention as for pleasure.

Ellu sadam—sesame rice—appears around winter harvests, its nutty



richness aligning with cooler days. In Kerala, *kappa puzhukku* offers comfort through simplicity. Tapioca, once a famine food, becomes deeply satisfying when mashed with coconut and spice, especially when evenings turn breezy.

Winter food, I've learnt, is India's quiet teacher. It asks us to slow down, to store, to trust time and instinct. Long after the season passes, these dishes linger—proof that the most enduring flavours are born not of abundance, but of attention.



Check Out These Recipes!

Sarson da saag and *Makke di roti* on pg. 27

Chicken *cafreal* on pg. 28

Sattu sharbat on pg. 30

Gond ke laddoo on pg. 31

(clockwise from bottom left) ragi mudde; ellu sadam; milagu kuzhambu; kozhi rasam; kappa puzhukku



Warmth, Served Slow

In Kashmir, winter food is sustenance and ritual. As MARRYAM H. RESHII explores, harissa anchors the cold months, alongside a cache of warming dishes shaped by season, instinct, and centuries-old wisdom

You will never hear the word *Ayurveda* mentioned in the same breath as Kashmir, yet the food of the Valley—its seasons, and the moment when each ingredient comes into its own or recedes until the following year—mirrors Ayurvedic principles to a remarkable degree. Foods here have long been codified as ‘cooling’ or ‘warming’ and are eaten accordingly. There are no melons or cucumbers in winter, and no fish in summer for most residents of the Valley, as fish is considered heating to the

system. Somewhat curiously, meat—almost invariably from sheep, never goat—is par for the course, come rain, sun, or snow.

Seasoned by Cold

Mutton—the meat of the sheep—is eaten virtually every day of the week, every week of the year, by every resident of the Valley who can afford it, regardless of religious faith. Ask anyone on the street and they will vehemently deny that mutton is heating or heavy to the system. Every meal has a component of lamb, except for breakfast. And in winter, when the mercury plummets, even breakfast makes room for lamb, for that is when *harissa* comes into its own.

Harissa is chunk meat with bones attached, slow-cooked with warming spices like cinnamon and clove, dried ginger and garlic, in a large copper vessel until

(clockwise from right) tchot, the quotidian bread of Kashmir; harissa, slow-cooked to perfection; sheep and mountain goats are the region's and season's backbone



the meat is fork-tender. The bones are then separated, the liquid allowed to reduce almost completely, and the contents of the pot stirred tirelessly with an imposing wooden pestle for over an hour, rendering the meat into a paste. *Harissa* may best be described as the pâté of Kashmiri cuisine.

By the time it is ready, every fiber has dissolved into oblivion, leaving behind only the essence of lamb and a rich, unctuous body, with spices offering a faint background note rather than overt flavour. It has texture, yet is never fibrous. A piece of *tchot*—the baker's bread eaten across Kashmir every morning—is torn and dipped into the *harissa*.

It is not a morsel easily described. The texture is smooth and creamy, with the faintest suggestion of chew. It is the product of long, slow cooking over a wood fire through most of the night. Black cardamom and

cinnamon leave their subtle imprint. Garlic is almost certainly present—Kashmir holds firmly to the belief that meat must be cooked with garlic to counter the lamb's natural odour—yet it never announces itself as a distinct flavour.

The Making of Harissa

The first time I encountered this ambrosial dish, I had to be dragged, more or less kicking and screaming, into a *harissa-gor's* eatery in Ganz Khod, Srinagar's Old City. I was never much of a red meat eater and assumed *harissa* would be overly spiced and 'too meaty'—a term I privately coined for meals dominated entirely by red meat.

Inside, the shop was disarmingly ordinary. There were no women present, but the warmth radiating from the cooking area was deeply comforting. A couple of dozen men sat cross-legged



on thick carpets, dunking bread into steaming bowls of pâté-like meat, eating with unmistakable pleasure. That was invitation enough.

The *harissa-gor*—the man who cooks and sells just this one dish through winter—needed no prompting. There was no menu to study. *Harissa* shops sell one item, its price prominently displayed.

Fire, Patience, Ritual

What sets winter preparations of mutton apart is their unapologetic richness. When warmth is the goal, digestion is secondary. In that sense, *harissa* is the natural corollary to *wazwan*, Kashmir's elaborate banquet of multiple lamb-based dishes prepared by professional cooks for weddings and milestones. *Wazwan* requires teams of specialists cooking in courtyards over wood fires, while the *harissa-gor* works alone, producing a single dish using little more than a copper pot, wooden oar-like spoon, pestle, and patience.

Wood fire, expertly butchered lamb, a handful of spices, and the quiet genius of an anonymous originator—*harissa* remains Kashmir's most comforting answer to winter, warming the body even as snow falls silently outside.

(clockwise from left) *harissa's* fiery finish; market places across Kashmir abound with streetfood shops; produce-laden shikaras on Srinagar's Dal Lake



In Kashmir, winter reveals itself through these everyday recipes.

Doon Chetin

A winter must-have Kashmiri chutney, *doon chetin* is where the earthiness of fresh walnuts and creamy curd meet the heat of the chillies and the pungency of the garlic.



Serves
4-6

Ingredients

½ cup walnuts
½ cup curd (thick)
1/2 green chillies
2 cloves garlic
2 tbsp coriander leaves
Salt, to taste
1 tsp lemon juice
A pinch of Kashmiri red chilli powder

Method

Heat a pan on a medium flame and add the walnuts. Dry roast them, tossing constantly, until lightly toasted and aromatic. Be careful not to burn them. Remove from heat and let them cool completely.

Add the cooled roasted walnuts to a blender along with the curd, green chillies, garlic, coriander leaves, lemon juice, salt, and a pinch of Kashmiri red chilli powder.

Blend until smooth and creamy. If needed, add a tablespoon of water to adjust the consistency.

Transfer to a clean, airtight container and refrigerate.

Tip: Use fresh walnuts and consume within a week for the best flavour.

Recipe by Team IFN



View the
recipe
video here!



Noon Chai

Kashmir's iconic pink, salty, milky tea is brewed from green tea leaves. Its distinctive blush comes from a reaction between baking soda and the tea during prolonged boiling, before milk is added.



Serves
1-2

Ingredients

300ml Water
2 tbsp Kashmiri green tea
1 tsp baking soda
50ml milk
Salt, as needed
Sweetener, as needed
Slivers of pistachio

Method

In a saucepan, bring the water to a boil and add the Kashmiri green tea. Let it simmer on a low flame for 5 to 7 minutes until the water deepens in colour.

Add the baking soda and continue simmering, stirring occasionally, until the tea has a slightly thick consistency and a rich reddish hue. Take it off the heat.

When ready to serve, bring the milk to a boil in another saucepan. Add the tea mixture with a pinch of salt. Adjust the milk, salt, and sweetener (if you want) to your taste.

Strain into cups, garnish with pistachio, and serve hot with crisp *khari* on the side.

Recipe by Team IFN



View the
recipe
video here!

When Rice Remembers...

In this tender food memory, HOIHNU HAUZEL reflects on how rice, smoke and tea mark the New Year in Northeast India, carrying home across seasons and distance

There are days when I miss the food of home so deeply that it almost feels like missing a person. And when I say food at home, it is not about typical comfort food in the ordinary sense. I mean food that carries a time, a place, a season. Food that arrives with all the drama that surrounds it. It could be firelight,

bonfires, cold evenings, chatter, and the feeling of being held by something familiar.

Sometimes it was the sound of children—mostly my nieces and nephews. One of them at the piano. Another on the guitar. Others giggling, skating, jumping, and cycling. Their laughter moved through everything,



filling the spaces in between. That, together, is what made a memory of home.

Then there was the aroma of food drifting in from the kitchen. It always felt like a call. We knew, without being told, that it was time for something special.

Now, the thought of home comes back loudest when the seasons begin to change.

Rice, Poured

Across Northeast India, rice is eaten and drunk. Fermented rice beers—*apong*, *zu*, *kyat* and *ting*—are made with herbs and starters, shared at harvests yearly



Rice in its myriad varieties forms the backbone of the Northeast; (top) a steaming pot of rice is where smoke and memory begin

Where Everything Begins

At the heart of that longing is rice. Always rice. In the Northeast, rice is not just what we eat; it is how we live. It fills most of our fields—nearly seventy percent of the cropped land—with pulses quietly following behind. And yet, despite the endless green of our hills and valleys, this entire region contributes only a small fraction to the country's rice story. We grow rice not because it is easy or profitable, but because it is inevitable. Because it is a way of life.

That is why certain foods stay with you forever.

One such taste is *tanghou*. No matter where life takes me, this is something I return to in memory. Just hearing its name brings back Manipur in winter—the fire burning low, hands stretched out for warmth, the air thick with smoke and conversation. *Tanghou* tastes best then.

Tanghou is a sticky rice cake, and nearly every community in the region has its own version. Making it is never a solitary act. Sticky rice is grown patiently on difficult land, often high up in the hills. Once harvested, the paddy is pounded, the chaff separated, winnowed, and cleaned—a slow, careful process.

The rice is then ground into a fine powder. Water is added slowly. Hands bring the dough together and shape it gently—because the hands matter, and that care shows. It is wrapped in banana or plantain leaves, knowing the leaves will add their own gentle flavour, and then steamed. When the leaves are peeled away, soft rice cakes emerge, warm and fragrant. They are eaten with black tea, sweetened with jaggery.

This is rice remembering where it comes from.

Across the Northeast, rice adapts to the land. It grows high in Arunachal Pradesh, spreads across Assam's plains, thrives in Manipur's uplands and lowlands, softens in Meghalaya, fills valleys in Mizoram, and survives in hundreds of preserved varieties in Nagaland. Productivity has always been low. The land is fragile. But rice here is grown with acceptance, not ambition.

This was often our evening on Christmas. And on the night of the 31st, it was essential. Rice was pounded in advance, stored as powder. *Tanghou* was made, and the New Year arrived.



Rice Beyond the Plate

In the Northeast, rice marks more than meals. It signals harvests, gatherings, farewells, and beginnings. Long before it is eaten, rice has already done its work.



(clockwise from above) a plate of rice and pork; banana leaf wrapped rice parcels; pork curry gently simmering; freshly steamed tanghou



Pics: Hohnu Hauzel, Raul Dias and iStock



Why Smoke Matters

Smoking was never just preservation. Above the hearth, food absorbed time—days, conversations, seasons. The flavour of smoke is also the flavour of waiting.



(clockwise from above) strips of pork left to air dry; pork roasting over an open fire; cups of strong black tea poured to slow evenings and mark new beginnings; smoked pork with rice

Smoke Held in Time

Another taste that never leaves me is that of roasted pork. Thick, chunky pieces of meat, salted and sun-dried, kept on the *khintung*—a bamboo shelf built above the kitchen fire. The *khintung* is becoming rare now, but when I was young, it was a familiar sight in my grandfather's kitchen in Mission Compound, deep inside southern Manipur's Churachandpur district.

It was where nearly everything from the farm ended up. Chillies were hung to dry. Yam leaves, rolled like small woolen balls, were stored away. Mustard leaves were kept there too, drying slowly. The kitchen fire was almost always on. A kettle, blackened by smoke, sat over the fire, filled with tea—that was how visitors were welcomed.

The pork hung there for days, taking in the smoke, drying slowly, cooking in its own time. Once ready, it was roasted over an open fire and eaten just like that. Sometimes it was cooked again with broken rice, ginger, and garlic—what we call *mehpok*. Other times, the chunky pieces were sliced and made into chutney, mixed with tomatoes, ginger, garlic, and chillies. And then there was the one cooked with mustard leaves—leaves grown right there, in that soil. Because the soil matters.

And maybe that's why so many who live away from home still wait for parcels of food grown in that same soil. What they really carry is memory and flavour.



How Evenings End

And then there was tea. Most often black, without milk, sweetened with jaggery. When it was milk tea, it was unapologetically rich—just milk boiled repeatedly. It was thick, without sugar. That depth of flavour was a treat and an indulgence, the kind you wanted to sit with a little longer over good, hearty conversations that are now rare.

Tea held everything together. It warmed cold hands, slowed conversations, and anchored evenings. With *tanghou*, with pork, with firelight, it marked both endings and beginnings. It was poured when suitors came calling, and it was there at funerals and weddings alike. Tea is what connects and symbolises many things.

When the New Year arrived, we brought out our best homegrown tea and drank again. These foods are more than recipes. It is the taste of home.



Yes Chef!

By MONISHA ADVANI



At the time of making a reservation at a restaurant, I'm often politely asked "Any allergies or dietary preferences?" My response is consistent - I am allergic to hunger and prefer to not leave a table hungry. That pretty much sums up my qualifications to write this column. Of course, I sound facetious if I didn't back the quip with a deep appreciation for the hands that feed me. And on top of the heap are the hands that lead those that feed. I am therefore utterly grateful, sometimes in awe and always curious for the role played by the chef.

A mound of Indrayani rice, carefully boiled in a stock of fish bones to lightly embrace flavour, covered by translucent slivers of gently poached, deboned-with-precision Bombay duck, crowned by a generous and deliberate smear of freshly ground garlic *thecha*, with droplets of hand-churned ghee to finish the presentation. This is Maharashtra on a plate. This is Niyati Rao. No fuss, simple ingredients, inspired by her colourful upbringing, and yet a near-perfect marriage of taste, texture and timelessness.

I describe this dish vividly as it is the very reason why, despite a very shaky start, Chef Niyati's Ekaa in Mumbai remained on my list of restaurants to frequent.

The shaky start is, in itself, a masterclass in tenacity. Two college sweethearts nurse a dream to have their own restaurant. Many summers and winters spent between restaurants in Dubai, at sea, and finally through the hallowed walls of Noma, they find their way back home, bravely raise money to launch their chef-led restaurant titled Ekaa, only to find themselves stumped by the pandemic.

Midway through stop-start renovations, they run out of money as investors back out, try everything from handing out flyers soliciting investors to the rare drivers that plied the deserted roads of Mumbai during those COVID months, to DM-ing reality web series stars soliciting investments...

Somewhere, luck took a chance, and Niyati Rao and Sagar Neve found themselves in business. Their roles were well demarcated. Niyati would be the chef and Sagar the business partner. Five years on, Ekaa has birthed the KMC Bar & Bistros in Mumbai, Nonna Mei in Shillong, and most recently, the bakery to fulfil all buttery dreams—



Chef Niyati Rao; (below) inside the open kitchen at Ekaa, Mumbai



Ringo, also in Mumbai.

While I admire their partnership, this piece focuses on the chef.

My first impressions of Niyati during the opening days of Ekaa were mixed. She raced between an overworked open kitchen and an impressively large, functional dining hall that was heaving from the heat generated by the kitchen, air-conditioning that wasn't enough for the high ceilings. All expected teething problems, which were unfortunately underlined by a frowning young chef-owner. The front office experience left a lot to be desired. However, my scepticism was put to rest by that incredible dish I described at the start.

Bombay duck, till then, was a deep-fried delicacy whose popularity demanded it not be eaten any other way. Chef Niyati Rao had masterfully defied the norm. And that stood out for me far more than the chaos.

Unfortunately, the creases of those early days and mixed reviews kept me away for an entire year. It was in 2022 when Niyati messaged me to wish me for a web series I had produced. We struck up a conversation—and the start of a friendship I have come to count on.

When we next met, rather than returning the favour of compliments, I offloaded my first impressions and, to my surprise, found a very receptive Niyati. She soaked up the critique and confessed how front office was a new dimension to her role as chef—one that she did not intend to take lightly. I was delighted and gladdened to learn that she had started working on herself and the personality she projected. That confidence radiated from her, and I could see she had already started working on a new and improved version.

My next meal at Ekaa was an absolute hit. The organic bonhomie



(clockwise from above) ferments prepared in-house; a variety of tomatoes on the plate; dishes shaped by time and technique; the dining room as service begins; Rao, mid-service in the Ekaa kitchen

flowed between front office and back office. The kitchen hummed rhythmically, and the food and drinks flowed seamlessly. Chef Niyati was in control, and she was playing off cues from each table. But so was her food.

A fatiguing over-emphasis on deep-fried fare had made way for locally sourced ingredients that were being served in every form—ferment, stew, soak, sweet, savoury and more. The proteins were diverse, and there was respect accorded to each one in treatment. What I loved was that Niyati reflected in each dish—her *aji*, her mum, her mother-in-law, her father, her travels.

And that is Chef Niyati—the sum of all parts, experiences that take shape and gain life in her kitchen.

Since then, I have an annual date at Ekaa on Christmas Eve. If you are in Mumbai and find yourself with an evening to celebrate, there cannot be a better place to do so. The theatrics and themes change with each year, making the experience interactive. But it is the food that shines through. Carefully thought-out courses that weave you through some magical Christmas tale.

The future stands bright before this young chef. She shrugs off her exclusion from annual popular restaurant lists, gratefully appreciates the ones that care to notice. She is well aware of the fact that she is swimming against the tide in an industry dominated largely by men—and women who don't challenge the men. My respect for her comes in abundance as I see her take it all in her stride.

Every now and then, I catch a glimpse of a little girl with big eyes who took every opportunity to run to the market with her grandmothers and mother to shop for the day's catch. And that innocence is what endears her—and the food she serves.

To Niyati Rao, I say, YES CHEF!



(clockwise from above right) impeccably plated seasonal courses and desserts define the Ekaa experience; Ekaa after the rush

Flavours of Home

As winter deepens, our kitchens turn to slow-cooked comforts, robust flavours, and dishes that warm from within. TEAM FRESH brings together a collection of winter recipes designed for cozy meals and everyday indulgence during the colder months

Sarson da Saag with Makke di Roti

A true Punjabi winter classic, this hearty pairing brings together slow-cooked mustard greens and rustic maize rotis, finished with white butter for comfort in every bite.



Serves

2

[View the recipe video here!](#)



Ingredients

Sarson da Saag

300gm sarson (mustard) leaves
1 tbsp garlic
1 tbsp ginger
5 green chillies
Ice water, for blanching
2 tbsp oil
3 dried red chillies
1 cup chopped onion
1 tbsp chopped garlic
1 tbsp sliced green chillies
1 tsp cumin seeds
Salt, to taste
1 tbsp coriander powder
½ tbsp cumin powder
Ginger, sliced (for garnish)
1 tbsp white butter

Makke di Roti

2 cups makka atta (corn meal)
Salt, to taste
Water, as needed

Method

Wash the sarson leaves thoroughly. Bring a pot of water to a boil and add the leaves along with garlic and green chillies. Cook until softened.

Transfer promptly to ice-cold water to lock in the colour. Once cooled, blend into a coarse paste and set aside.

Heat oil in a heavy kadhai. Add cumin seeds and dried red chillies. Once they crackle, add ginger, garlic, and green chillies, and sauté until aromatic.

Add onions and cook until lightly golden. Stir in coriander powder, cumin powder, and salt. Add the prepared sarson paste and cook on a medium flame, stirring often, until glossy and well cooked.

Finish with sliced ginger, chopped green chillies, and white butter.

For the rotis, mix makka atta, salt, and water to form a soft dough. Divide into portions and flatten gently.

Cook on a hot tawa until golden on both sides. Serve hot with the saag, sliced onions and a daub of white butter.

Recipe by Team IFN





Til Gud Paratha

Til gud paratha is a classic winter comfort flatbread, filled with the earthy warmth of sesame seeds and jaggery, best enjoyed fresh off the tawa.



Serves

4

Ingredients

(for the dough)
3 cups wheat flour
2 tbsp ghee
Salt, as needed
1 ½ cups water
(for the stuffing)
2 cups desiccated coconut
2 cups jaggery
2 cups sesame seeds
1 tsp cardamom powder



View the
recipe
video here!

Method

Begin by adding wheat flour, salt, and ghee to a thali. Gradually pour in water and knead into a soft, smooth dough. Cover and let it rest for 15-20 minutes.

While the dough rests, prepare the stuffing by combining desiccated coconut, jaggery, sesame seeds, and cardamom powder in a bowl. Mix well until evenly combined.

Divide the rested dough into equal portions. Take one portion, flatten it slightly, place a generous amount of stuffing in the center, and seal the edges carefully.

Gently flatten the stuffed dough ball and roll it out into a paratha, dusting lightly with flour if needed.

Heat a tawa on medium flame and cook the paratha, applying ghee on both sides, until golden and cooked through.

Serve hot with fresh curd for the best flavour and texture.

Recipe by Team IFN

Chicken Cafreal

A bold, herb-forward Goan classic with fresh coriander, warm spices, and green chillies in a punchy, pan-roasted preparation with roots in far Mozambique!



Serves

4

Ingredients

1 kg chicken
(for the marinade)
1 cup fresh coriander leaves
1 tbsp ginger
1 tbsp garlic
4 green chillies
1 tsp cumin seeds
1 tbsp black peppercorn
1 tsp turmeric powder
2 tbsp lemon juice
2-3 tbsp oil
Salt, to taste

(for cooking)
2 tbsp oil
1 large onion, chopped
1-2 tsp garam masala
1 tbsp red chilli powder

Method

Blend all the marinade ingredients into a smooth, vibrant green paste.

Place the chicken in a bowl, add the marinade, and coat well. Cover and rest for at least 30 minutes.

Heat oil in a kadhai and sauté the onions until lightly golden. Add the marinated chicken and toss well.

Cook uncovered on a medium flame, stirring occasionally, allowing the moisture to evaporate and the masala to cling to the chicken.

Finish with garam masala and red chilli powder. Remove from the heat once the preparation turns dry. Serve hot.



View the
recipe
video here!



Recipe by Team IFN



Lehsun ka Shorba

A warming, aromatic garlic broth that's light yet deeply comforting—perfect for cold days or when you need something soothing and restorative.



Serves

3-4

Ingredients

3 garlic bulbs
3 tbsp oil
½ inch ginger
1 tbsp black peppercorn
1 liter water
2 tsp turmeric powder
Salt, to taste
Fried garlic bits, to garnish
Fresh coriander, to garnish
Crushed black pepper, to finish

Method

Heat oil in a deep pan over a medium flame. Add the roughly chopped garlic with the skin on and let it sizzle gently until fragrant.

Add ginger and black peppercorns, stirring briefly to release their aroma.

Pour in the water, add turmeric and salt, and bring to a rolling boil. Let it simmer so the flavours infuse into the broth.

Strain into bowls and finish with fried garlic bits, fresh coriander, and crushed black pepper. Serve hot.

Tip: Add a squeeze of lemon juice before serving to balance the flavour.

Recipe by Team IFN

View the
recipe
video here!



Cherry Halwa

A fragrant, jewel-toned dessert where juicy fresh cherries meet roasted semolina, khoya, and floral rose syrup, creating a festive halwa that feels indulgent yet delicately balanced.



Serves

2

Ingredients

500gm fresh cherries (pitted)
2 tbsp semolina
2 tbsp ghee
3 tbsp sugar
4 tbsp khoya
A pinch of cardamom powder
1 tbsp rose syrup
Chopped nuts (almonds, pistachios, cashews)

Method

Heat a frying pan over a low flame. Add the ghee and semolina and cook gently, stirring continuously, until the semolina toasts evenly and turns lightly golden.

Add the fresh cherries and cook for a few minutes until they soften and release their juices. Stir in the sugar and mix well.

As the sugar melts and the mixture begins to bubble, add the khoya and stir until it blends smoothly into the halwa.

Fold in the chopped nuts, stirring well to distribute them evenly.

Finish with cardamom powder and a drizzle of rose syrup. Cook until the halwa reaches a slightly thick, glossy consistency. Garnish with pistachios and a touch of rose syrup. Serve warm or chilled.



Recipe by Team IFN

View the
recipe
video here!





Black Lemon Pickle

A nostalgic sweet-and-spicy nimbu ka achaar where sun-dried lemons are slow-cooked in a fragrant, sticky syrup.



Serves

6–8

Ingredients

40 lemons
3 tbsp oil
1 tbsp mustard seeds
2 cinnamon sticks
1 tbsp fennel seeds
1 bay leaf
1 tbsp black peppercorn
1 tsp red chilli powder
1 tsp cumin powder
2 cups brown sugar
1 cup white sugar
2 cups water
1 tsp black pepper powder
Salt, to taste

Method

Halve the lemons, squeeze out the juice, and sun-dry the halves for 3–4 days until slightly softened.

Heat oil in a kadhai and add mustard seeds, cinnamon sticks, fennel seeds, bay leaf, and peppercorns. Let them splutter and turn aromatic.

Add red chilli powder and cumin powder, stirring briefly on a low flame.

Add both sugars and water, cooking until the sugar dissolves and forms a lightly thickened syrup.

Add the sun-dried lemons and mix well to coat evenly. Season with black pepper powder, salt, and simmer gently.

Once the syrup thickens and clings to the lemons, turn off the heat. Cool completely and store in an airtight jar.

Recipe by Team IFN

View the
recipe
video here!



Sattu Sharbat

An earthy, savoury cooler made from roasted channa—refreshing, spicy, and deeply satisfying.



Serves

4–5

Ingredients

3 cups roasted channa
4 dried red chillies
1 tsp black peppercorn
1 tsp cumin seeds
1 tsp fennel seeds
½ cup chopped onion
2 green chillies
1 tbsp coriander
1 tbsp lemon juice
1 tsp salt

Method

Remove the skins from the roasted channa for a smoother texture.

Dry-roast the red chillies, cumin seeds, black peppercorns, and fennel seeds until aromatic. Let them cool slightly.

Grind the roasted channa and spices into a fine, smooth sattu powder.

Transfer to a bowl and add onion, green chillies, coriander, salt, and lemon juice.

Gradually whisk in cold water until smooth and drinkable.

Taste, adjust seasoning if needed, and serve chilled or over ice.

Recipe by Team IFN

View the
recipe
video here!



Sandalwood Smoked Piyush

A rich Maharashtrian yoghurt-based drink, gently spiced with cardamom and nutmeg, finished with saffron and subtle sandalwood smoke.



Serves
4-6

Ingredients

2 cups hung curd
1 cup powdered sugar
1 tsp cardamom powder
1 tsp nutmeg powder
3 tbsp saffron water
700ml milk
1 chandan (sandalwood) stick
1 tbsp pistachios
Saffron strands, to garnish

Method

Whisk the hung curd until completely smooth and creamy.

Add powdered sugar, cardamom powder, nutmeg powder, saffron water, and milk, and whisk until well combined.

Strain if needed for a finer texture.

Place a small heatproof bowl in the center, add a smoking chandan stick, and cover tightly for a minute or two to infuse the aroma.

Remove the bowl, stir once, chill well, and garnish with pistachios and saffron strands before serving.

Recipe by Team IFN

View the
recipe
video here!



Gond ke Ladoo

A winter classic packed with warmth and nourishment, these gond ke ladoos are rich, nutty, and deeply comforting.



Serves
8-10

Ingredients

100gm gond (edible tree gum)
4 tbsp ghee
50gm makhana (fox nuts)
50gm cashews and almonds, chopped
30gm white sesame seeds
30gm dried coconut
50gm besan
100gm wheat flour
150gm powdered sugar

Method

Heat ghee on a low flame and add the gond. Let it puff up slowly, stirring constantly, until crisp. Remove and lightly crush once cooled.

Roast the makhana until crunchy, crush coarsely, and add to the bowl with the gond.

Roast cashews and almonds until lightly golden and add them to the bowl along with sesame seeds and dried coconut.

In the same pan, roast besan and wheat flour in ghee on a low flame until golden and aromatic.

Switch off the heat and mix in the crushed gond, makhana, nuts, seeds, coconut, and powdered sugar.

Shape into tight ladoos while the mixture is still warm.

Tip: Cool completely and store.

Recipe by Megha Mahindroo



View the
recipe
video here!



For The Record

As vinyl spins back into cultural relevance, RAUL DIAS reflects on India's growing love affair with listening bars, cafés and rooms where music is finally meant to be heard



(clockwise from above) the turntable and record selection at Vinyl & Brew, Chennai; an old gramophone and the bar area at Baroke, Mumbai

I've begun to notice it almost everywhere I go lately—this subtle but unmistakable shift in how we are choosing to listen to music again. Not passively, not as sonic wallpaper piped through bad speakers, but with intention. Across India's cities, listening bars, listening rooms and vinyl-forward cafés are quietly asserting themselves as cultural spaces, and every time I walk into one, it feels like stepping into a collective pause button.

The idea, of course, isn't new. Its origins lie thousands of miles away in Japan's jazz *kissas*—listening rooms born in the post-war years where vinyl was treated with near-religious reverence. Conversation was minimal, the sound systems immaculate, and the focus absolute. These were places where you went not to be seen, but to hear. That philosophy, carried across decades and continents, feels almost subversive today, in an era shaped by streaming algorithms and endless skipping.

Needle Drop

Perhaps that's why this moment resonates so deeply with me. Growing

up in the 1980s, I remember vinyl as part of domestic life. My father's record collection wasn't curated or cool—it was simply there. Large sleeves stacked neatly, the deliberate act of sliding a record out, the gentle crackle before the music settled in. Listening demanded patience. You didn't shuffle tracks or jump between moods. You committed to a side, sometimes an entire album. Watching vinyl return now, embraced by a generation that never lived with it, feels less like nostalgia and more like rediscovery.

What excites me about India's listening spaces is how they've evolved beyond being purist rooms of silence. They're social, warm, layered with food, drink and conversation, yet still anchored in sound. In Mumbai's Kala Ghoda, for instance, The Listening Room at The Dimsum Room blurs the line between dining and listening without diluting either. Music there isn't background filler—it's an emotional partner to the meal, curated carefully, played through a system that makes you notice texture, space and even silence. You find yourself slowing down, eating more mindfully, staying longer than planned.





City Beats

Down in Chennai, Vinyl & Brew in Teynampet approaches the same idea through coffee and community. It feels less like a café and more like a cultural living room where generations overlap naturally. Teenagers discovering vinyl for the first time sit alongside older patrons reconnecting with music they once loved, while jazz sessions and listening evenings create an easy, unforced intimacy. It's comforting, almost reassuring, to see how analogue sound still has the power to pull people together.

Ahmedabad's Blockheads Vinyl Cafe in Ashok Vatika leans directly into the Japanese listening-bar lineage but gives it a distinctly contemporary Indian expression. Here, vinyl, comfort food and coffee coexist effortlessly. Private turntables at tables, silent-disco headsets and izakaya-inspired plates allow you to choose your level of engagement—deeply personal or openly social. It's the kind of place where you can lose yourself in a record or discuss liner notes over a burger, and both experiences feel equally valid. Mumbai's Baroke near the Grant Road train station, meanwhile, takes a

bolder stance. As a vinyl-only listening bar, it restores music to the center of nightlife, refusing to let it dissolve into ambient noise. With a carefully curated collection spanning legends like Jimi Hendrix, Stan Getz, The Doors, George Benson, Bryan Adams and Dave Brubeck, evenings unfold as guided sonic journeys rather than random playlists. A dedicated headphone zone, inspired by Japanese listening rooms, offers moments of introspection amid the social buzz—a reminder that listening can be both communal and deeply personal.

The 'B' Side

Beyond these headline spaces, the movement is quietly gaining ground through places like Bengaluru's Middle Room in Shanti Nagar, Panaji's For The Record and Idoru in Mumbai's hip Bandra neighbourhood. Each interprets the listening ethos differently, but all share a common thread: respect for sound, for physical formats, and for the ritual of listening itself.

What I find most compelling is that these aren't just music spaces. They're places to eat, drink coffee, sip cocktails, talk, remember. They offer refuge from digital fatigue and constant distraction. Vinyl, with its imperfections and demands, asks something of us—and in return, it gives us presence. As the needle drops and the room settles into sound, it becomes clear that this isn't merely a trend. It's a return to listening as an experience, not a backdrop—and one I'm more than happy to sit with, side A to side B.

(with inputs by Shreya Mukherjee)

A QUICK SPIN AROUND THE GLOBE'S MOST ICONIC LISTENING BARS THAT SHAPED THE CULTURE

Jazz Kissa Lion, Tokyo

One of Japan's oldest jazz *kissas*, where silence is sacred and vinyl is revered.

Brilliant Corners, London

A cult listening bar pairing rare records with natural wine and modern small plates.

Public Records, New York City

Part listening room, part restaurant, part cultural institution for audiophiles.

Jassmine, Paris

An intimate hi-fi bar known for its eclectic vinyl programming and serious sound systems.

Bar Shiru, Oakland

A vinyl-only listening bar inspired directly by Japanese jazz *kissas*.



(above) The Listening Room, Mumbai.
(top left) Ahmedabad's Blockheads Vinyl Cafe

What Makes a Listening Bar?

High-fidelity sound systems, vinyl-first programming, carefully considered acoustics—and music that's meant to be heard, not skipped.

Liquid Future

As India's cocktail culture matures, PRIYANKO SARKAR gives us a closer look at the forces shaping the direction in which India's drinks industry is headed. Buckle up—there are surprises to sip!

India's drinks landscape is shifting faster than ever. From buzzing Tier 2 cocktail capitals to globally inspired bar menus, 2025 proved that Indian drinkers are curious, confident and ready for change. As bartenders push technique, celebrities back new spirit labels and once-niche flavours find mass appeal, the stage is set for another transformative year. Here's a look at the trends, movements and bottles poised to shape what—and how—we'll be drinking in 2026:

Tier 2 Cities Are Rising Fast

A textile tycoon's son from Indore once spent every weekend at Mumbai's bars. Now, thanks to his own city's booming cocktail scene—think Atelier V and Library Bar—he barely travels for a great drink. Similar shifts are happening across Tier 2 cities, with bars like Tepah

By The Bagh and Lord Elgin in Amritsar, Monsoon and Coco Osteria in Dehradun, and Citrus Garden Project in Bhopal drawing serious attention. These bars aren't playing catch-up. They're showcasing technique-forward cocktails crafted by award-winning bartenders and delivering vibrant, contemporary menus for increasingly discerning local audiences.

Picantes Are Staying On

After exploring bars across Delhi, Bengaluru, Jaipur, Goa, Kolkata and emerging Tier 2 hotspots, one thing is unmistakable: the Picante continues to dominate India's cocktail cravings. Essentially a spicy margarita with a *chaat*-like kick, its roots trace back to Soho House Los Angeles in 2012. In India, bartenders have elevated it further through playful infusions ranging from beetroot to yuzu. As many bartenders told this writer, there's simply no turning back. From Goa to Gurugram, the nation is hooked. Riding the wave is a new spirit: Pinkante, a small-batch gin picante from the makers of colour-changing Nisaki Gin. With no signs of slowing, picantes are set to headline cocktail menus well into 2026.



Did You Know?

The Picante—India's favourite spicy cocktail—was born in Los Angeles, but found its true long-term home on Indian menus.



(clockwise from left) Tepah By The Bagh; Nisaki's Pinkanté; Patrón OG Picante

What India's Drinking Next

- Spicy, savoury cocktails over sweet
- Japanese sake on Indian bar menus
- Technique-driven drinks beyond metros
- Global bars popping up, briefly—but memorably



A Sake Revolution is Brewing

You may not know Maia Laifungbam yet, but her eponymous sake—Maia—is poised to make history as India's first homegrown sake brand. As India's first Toji (sake master brewer), Laifungbam has collaborated with Kyoto's Yamamoto Honke to bring accessible, authentic sake to Indian drinkers. Meanwhile, Japanese sake received a GI tag in India under its traditional name, Nihonshu, opening the door to a broader and higher-quality range of imports. Sake professional Mika Eoka notes that this will significantly improve access for Indian consumers. Between the arrival of India's first domestic label and the influx of Japanese bottles, sake lovers are in for an exciting season.

Gear Up for More International Bar Takeovers

International bar takeovers have surged, with many global names debuting in India. Jakarta's Cosmo Pony landed at The Bombay Canteen, Shanghai's Sober Company appeared at Mizu Izakaya Goa, and Form + Matter from Mexico City toured three Indian cities—offering drinkers a taste of bars featured on global "50 Best" lists.

These takeovers have also grown more immersive. At Late Checkout in Mumbai, Gurugram's The Brook presented a limited-edition



Ladakh-inspired menu featuring yak cheese, wild horsemint, sea buckthorn and more. Expect even more such travelling menus and first-time pop-ups as Indian bars—and their audiences—become increasingly global in their tastes.

Celebrities Will Launch More Spirit Brands

Celebrity-led spirit launches have gathered serious pace. Ajay Devgn's The GlenJourneys whisky, Ranveer Singh's Rangeela vodka, Badshah's Shelter 6 vodka, Sanjay Dutt's Tigerfire vodka, Yuvraj Singh's Fino tequila and Rana Daggubati's Loca Loka tequila all made their mark. And this momentum shows no signs of slowing. Globally, celebrities have long tapped into the spirits business—remember George Clooney's Casamigos's

billion-dollar sale? In India, stars are using their influence to build premium labels aimed at luxury consumers. Proof of concept: Aryan Khan's D'Yavol Spirits sold a 47.5% stake to Radico Khaitan for ₹40 crore.

India's cocktail culture is in full bloom, fuelled by celebrity ambitions, cross-border bar exchanges and consumers hungry for bigger, bolder flavours. Whether you're hunting for your next Picante, exploring sake, discovering new spirits or sipping through inventive menus, the world in your glass has never been more exciting.

(clockwise from left) Tepah By The Bagh's Picante; Kimchi Picante; Rana Daggubati and the Loca Loka tequila team

India on Winter Plates

Hitch a ride with MANUSHI SHAH on a culinary trail shaped by winter and new beginnings



(clockwise from above) Mulberry Shades's winter spread; the hot wine cocktail at No Vacancy; a Millennial Ladki getaway

It is around mid-January that we must finally resign ourselves to the inevitability of failed New Year resolutions and begrudgingly make peace with the fact that perhaps 2026 isn't going to be spectacularly different from the year gone by. While the festive season is largely considered over, January is the month when winter is still lingering, we're still wearing our boots out, and hot chocolate hasn't entirely abandoned menus yet. As a tropical country, we may not have snowflakes falling outside our windows, but what we do have are uniquely playful, deeply local ways of enjoying the winter sun and the nip in the air, and we are looking at how India does winters on its plates.

Chill Scenes

Mumbai residents are now willing to make peace with about four days of winter and pull all stops to wear the cute hoodies we own. Restaurants

roll out winter-friendly menus with hot cocktails and spiced infusions—because even if the city doesn't have a winter, we certainly won't be denied winter menus. Toscano Mumbai warms things up with Hot Maple Buttered Rum and a cosy Golden Turmeric Latte, while Luna Et Sol promises an alpine escape with pine cones, pumpkins and flickering candles, paired with Spice Apple Strudel or Maple Frangipani Pecan Pie for dessert.

Across Goa, winter months call for local dishes with an extra serving of spice. The *zaad kanga* (Chinese potatoes) is a seasonal dish that finds itself incorporated into the year-round favourite *usal*. *Khaaje*, a jaggery-and-sesame-seeds sweet, is found at winter fairs around this time of year. Of course, hot toddy becomes the cocktail of choice, delivering on the experience while also soothing throats. If indulgence calls, Bonita at the Heritage





(clockwise from top left) the interiors of Bonita; pork momos and bowls of rawt chutney at Crumble Cafe

Village Resort and Spa offers limited-edition dishes, chef-led grill pop-ups and spirited craft cocktails. Meanwhile, Taj Fort Aguada adds warmth to the season with robust cinnamon- and peppercorn-laced concoctions.

Bengaluru, of course, needs no convincing that it has the best weather in the country. And winter or not, the climate is generally crisp and just right for elaborate spreads. At the Mulberry Shades Bengaluru Nandi Hills, where the lamb pie takes center stage, a delicately spiced recipe makes it perfect to be paired with winter-inspired cocktails and desserts.

Art and the Artisanal

Further south, Fort Kochi in Kerala revels in what the locals call winter—what others might call the less warm season. But you cannot deny them their favourites. Around this time, seasonal menus pop up across eateries, but Kashi Art and Cafe—where art meets artisanal fare—plans special dinners

Did You Know?

Chhanar cake is one of the last living relics of Kolkata's Anglo-Indian baking tradition, made with fresh *chhana* rather than flour-heavy batters.

Rawt, the Mizo chutney served with *momos*, is traditionally prepared fresh each morning, never stored overnight.

Hot toddies across India vary wildly: from spiced rum versions in Goa to whisky-laced brews in the north and herb-heavy local infusions in the hills.

featuring elevated plates like lobster and octopus cooked in Kerala masala.

Kolkata remains unmatched in the art of infusing cultural nuance into each season. While the city quietsens down after the Christmas festivities, the cold certainly sparks camaraderie. Park Street continues to draw a crowd, and local fare with an extra serving of spice finds plenty of takers. Those in a celebratory mode turn to one of Kolkata's best-kept secrets—the *chhanar* cake from J.N. Barua bakery—a delicate slice of Anglo-Indian history. Sadly, the next generation seems reluctant to carry the legacy forward, leaving this icon on uncertain footing.

In Mizoram, the crisp mountain weather allows for outdoorsy picnics and food that warms the cockles of the heart. Nunui Hnamte of Crumble Café, Aizawl, says pork *momo* remains a beloved staple, always served with *rawt*, a fiery chutney of charred tomatoes and chillies that adds both depth and aroma.

The New Year has been rung in, and it might be business as usual in other parts of the country, but Delhi knows how to party and has plenty to show for it. The cold demands innovation, and new bars oblige. At No Vacancy, the menu gets a seasonal makeover, including a wild yet warming Hot Chocolate with Mulled Wine cocktail—



YOUR WINTER GLOSSARY

Zaad kanga

Chinese potatoes, available briefly in winter and prized for their nutty texture.

Khaaje

A jaggery-sesame sweet associated with fairs and cold-weather gatherings in Goa.

Khad Paneer

A Rajasthani slow-cooking technique where food is sealed and buried, allowing heat, smoke and spice to work gradually.



rum, cognac, white chocolate, honey and winter spices like nutmeg, rosemary and basil coming together in a surprisingly elegant hot wine.

Sweet Escapes

If city life isn't quite delivering on its promise, perhaps it's time to literally head for the hills. At Araiya Palampur in Himachal Pradesh, guests can settle into a winter-perfect Alpine pop-up degustation menu featuring herb butter fondue, juniper-roasted vegetables, an indulgent winter cheese board

and spiced hot chocolate paired with mulled wine.

For those feeling experimental, Bir offers a retreat straight out of a Pinterest mood board. Japleen Kaur—better known as 'The Millennial Ladki'—hosts women-only workshops that include gingham-topped picnics with local wines, gingerbread-decorating sessions at a neighbourhood bakery and, if luck allows, a meteor shower (sadly not part of the official itinerary, but a magical bonus nonetheless).

A desert with dunes that stretch into the horizon isn't exactly the winter wonderland movies promise, but Rajasthan quietly delivers some of the most atmospheric escapes. At Sangam Farms, the Mewar Farm immersive dining experience blends crisp winter evenings, star-studded skies and live Rajasthani folk music with hyper-local produce and dramatic culinary rituals. The Khad Paneer ceremony is a highlight—guests gather around a pit as the pot is unearthed, its lid lifted to release a swirl of spice, smoke and anticipation before everyone tucks into the irresistibly tender *paneer* within.

We may not build snowmen or breathe pine-scented air (or, occasionally, even breathable air), but India's winter comes with its own flavour—warm, chaotic, inventive and deliciously ours.



(clockwise from top left) a thali at Araiya Palampur; a farm dinner at Sangam Farms; a winter cocktail at Taj Fort Aguada

Pics Courtesy: Mulberry Shades, Millennial Ladki, Bonita, Sangam Farms, Araiya Palampur, Taj Fort Aguada and Crumble Cafe



Quiet White Power

As Pantone's 'Cloud Dancer' stirs debate, PHORUM PANDYA explores how this nuanced white can soften kitchens, dining and living spaces—adding warmth, rhythm and a quietly confident sense of calm

One of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's novels is titled *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. It tells the story of a man whose very name means colourless, set against four friends named after colours—blue, red, white and black—who abruptly cut him out of their lives. What follows is a searching journey for meaning and truth.

Ironically, the announcement of Pantone's Colour of the Year 2026, Cloud Dancer, sparked similar

unease. Dismissed by some as flat or "colourless", it was quickly written off. Yet, when used with intention, designers insist Cloud Dancer can be quietly transformative.

Minnie Bhatt, founder of Minnie Bhatt Designs, Mumbai, describes it as "a warm, understated white that sits between classic neutral and emotional colour. Unlike stark whites, it has a softness that responds beautifully to light, shifting gently through the day to create calm, grounded interiors."



Perks of Being Subtle

Cloud Dancer works best as a foundational tone—on walls, ceilings, cabinetry and architectural surfaces—acting as a canvas that lets materiality and craftsmanship take center stage. “In kitchens and dining areas, warmth is key,” Bhatt explains. “Pair it with tactile materials and layered lighting. Think sand, taupe, mushroom greys and soft browns. Muted greens, clay tones and subtle terracottas add depth, while brushed brass or aged bronze elevate details and hardware.”

In kitchens especially, Cloud Dancer allows spaces to feel open and breathable, highlighting carpentry and surfaces without visual noise. Matte or softly textured finishes suit it best, while ceilings painted in the shade enhance light and height.

Beyond function, it sets an emotional register. “It creates calm,” Bhatt notes, “so furniture, art and personal objects feel intentional.” Layering is essential—woven rugs, linen or bouclé upholstery, soft drapery and wood with visible grain. Minimalist or maximalist, Cloud Dancer acts as a visual pause, balancing bolder elements without dulling them.

Slow but solid

While Indian homes have long embraced white for marble kitchen countertops and cabinetry, the softness of Cloud Dancer introduces a sense of slowness to the space. Amid simmering curries, colourful pickle jars, and baskets of vegetables and fruit, it lends an almost sacred calm. Even meals at the dining table seem to inherit that quiet, grounding serenity.

According to architect Priyank Mehta of PM Studio, Mumbai, Cloud Dancer—or any similar soft white—pairs best with earthy flooring rather than glossy, marble-like surfaces. “Add some mellow yellow lighting and you have the perfect container to introduce different design styles. The backdrop colour holds the space, allowing furniture, art and fabrics to take center stage,” says Mehta.



Loud in Its Quiet

For Umashan Naidoo, Head of Customer & Beauty at Trent Ltd, Westside, Cloud Dancer is an invitation to rethink white altogether. "It's about slightly tinted whites, layering textures, or even letting Cloud Dancer work with itself. A kitchen done this way could elevate how one cooks—and even how one plates food."

Mixing vintage pieces with the colour of the year, then adding a single pop—red, yellow or lime green—keeps things playful. "Think of Cloud Dancer as the pause between sentences," Naidoo says. "It lets everything else in the room speak clearly."



Soft Touch Accents



Malachite Inlaid Cutlery Set with White Marble Handles — ₹2,990

Bring a touch of refined indulgence to the table. Malachite-inlaid white marble handles elevate everyday dining, turning even the simplest meal into a quietly luxurious ritual.



Amodini Yellow Solid Round Sabai Grass Table Mats (Set of 2) — ₹1,090

Handwoven from natural *sabai* grass, these table mats draw on West Bengal's artisanal legacy, adding warmth, texture and an understated sophistication to everyday dining and a nice contrast to Cloud Dancer shade crockery.



Studio Pottery Ceramic Quarter Plate — ₹2,687

Crafted by Auroville artisans, this ceramic quarter plate blends natural materials with contemporary design, lending modern charm while celebrating thoughtful, sustainable craftsmanship.

Razza Ivory Tulip Buta Linen Kashmir Chain Stitch Cushion Cover — ₹5,999

Made from fine linen and adorned with delicate Kashmiri chain-stitch embroidery, this floral cushion cover brings softness, warmth and timeless elegance to living spaces.



Fresh discovers NISABA's Treacle Tart



Sweet Beginnings at NISABA

The rather yin and yang-esque looking Treacle Tart at NISABA in New Delhi is where memory, technique, and intent come together on a plate.

Inspired by the flavour profile of *dodha burfi*, the Treacle Tart was among the earliest desserts Chef Manish Mehrotra conceived when he began his journey with modern Indian food in 2009. The dish takes cues from the traditional treacle tart of the United Kingdom, reinterpreted with Indian sensibilities.

Having opened on 17 January at the Humayun Tomb Museum Complex, Chef Manish Mehrotra's newest restaurant feels reflective rather than reactive. It isn't shaped by trends or theatrics, but by a calm assurance that comes from knowing exactly what it wants to be. NISABA reads as a natural progression—of a chef's journey, and of how Indian dining is maturing today.

Chef Manish Mehrotra has spent years defining contemporary Indian food with

clarity and control. At NISABA, that lens turns to the everyday: dishes drawn from home kitchens, regional habits, and flavours rooted in memory. Familiar food is given space, refined gently without losing its sense of origin.

This is cooking meant for unhurried time. For lunches that slip into afternoon conversation, and evenings that find their own rhythm. Sustainability is present without proclamation—seen in thoughtful sourcing, minimal waste, and flavours that remain clean and direct.

The space follows the same philosophy. Soft light, measured architecture, and an easy transition from day to night make NISABA feel settled from the outset. A focused beverage program and carefully placed art complete the experience without excess. NISABA doesn't set out to redefine Indian food. It presents it with intent, warmth, and a modern ease that feels entirely at home in its moment.

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