

# Not Just About Tea

A new F&B operator  
from Bombay is  
redefining the concept  
of vegetarian dining in  
Singapore

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*By* **NITHYA SUBRAMANIAN**



**W**hen I visited Bombay some months ago, I was surprised at the number of new eateries that had mushroomed in the metropolis. One restaurant that stood out was Tea Villa Café. Buzzing with energetic youngsters, the place was filled even on a weekday afternoon as I passed by. This was in Vile Parle, which I later learnt, was the first outlet for this booming chain of cafes. Fast forward eight months. My curiosity was piqued when my young colleague excitedly instagrammed her experience at Tea Villa Café in Singapore. Her eyes lit up as she described the unique experience of dipping her crisp, buttered pao in a bhaji fondue. Pav Bhaji Fondue, did you ever? Something unheard of in Singapore! There were also detailed descriptions of Indian Maggi – the soul food of bachelors, Mac'n'Cheese Pizza and Paneer Bhurji quesadilla. Before long I found myself at Tea Villa Café in the East Coast.

Names are often deceptive and do not do justice to the whole story. Similarly, Tea Villa Café is not just about teas. While the brew is its speciality, here you are served a variety of vegetarian options taken from many different global cuisines.

Abhishek Rathod (36), the boyish-looking owner of Tea Villa Café, describes his restaurant as a pot-pourri of many cuisines. “People often walk past the place thinking this is a café selling Chinese teas or herbal teas or think because it has the ‘café’ suffix it will have only a limited menu. But that is not true, we have a vast menu of pure vegetarian dishes,” says the former banker who hails from Bombay. Indeed, one is spoilt for options at the café.

It has only been four months since the café was launched by Abhishek and Ekta Rathod also a banker, and the response has been positive. It has had over 8500 visitors and sold 3100 pav-bhajis mainly through word-of-mouth. Adds Ekta, a Singaporean Sindhi who works as a client relationship manager in Morgan Stanley, “the first day we opened, we didn’t tell anyone except maybe my mother. But we had full house for both lunch and dinner.”

With a warm opening response, the duo is hoping to not only make this outlet a success, but also open least three venues in Singapore in the next 12 months. They are also planning to expand into Malaysia and Indonesia. Here are some excerpts of an interview with the husband-wife duo:

**India Se:** What prompted you to give up a lucrative job in the finance industry and become an entrepreneur?

**Abhishek Rathod:** The banking industry has been going through a shaky period and jobs were moving out of Singapore. Some people decided to move out of this country, but I had a home and family here. I had spent more than 10 years here and did not want to move out just because my job was moving. I came to Singapore through Barclays and worked there for over eight years, until the bank went through a major crisis. From there I moved to Bank of America and it was there that I had the American dream moment. That was when I decided to start my own business. And thankfully I have an amazing partner who never doubted me.

It was, of course, a big risk. We had a house, a child and if one person leaves the job, the income is halved. Investing is one thing, but not earning is a risk. So, it was a tough

decision. But my daughter was below one and I felt that I should branch out before she grew up. They say the older we grow the less one’s appetite for risk, so we decided to start our own business before it was too late.

As a finance professional, I always thought I would do something on the side, and did try it once, without success. That broke me, so this time, I decided to quit and get into it full-time.

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**India Se:** Did you always want to be in the F&B space or just an entrepreneur?

**Abhishek Rathod:** I always wanted to be an entrepreneur, and preferred the F&B space. I enjoyed different styles of food – things that were unique and different. Also, whenever people want to celebrate they come to F&B outlets, be it a bar or a restaurant. They enjoy hanging out together. When I was growing up in Bombay, hanging out in a café was considered cool. We could go in, order a coffee and spend a couple of hours. A café was always cooler than a typical restaurant, which was too formal. So, when we started analysing Singapore's F&B scene, we felt a café would be more suitable.

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**India Se:** Why did you choose to bring Tea Villa to Singapore?

**Abhishek Rathod:** A few years back, when I wanted to do something in F&B, looking at healthy options, we started looking at Subway. I went through the selection process, but got rejected. While no reasons were given, I felt



that the brand did not need investors, it only wanted people who could run the franchises. I had not left my job then and was looking at doing this on the side. That's when I realised the need to be hands-on. So, when I actually decided to take the plunge, I left my job.

**Ekta:** Since we did not have any background in F&B, we felt that the franchise model would be the best for us.

**Abhishek Rathod:** We thought about going it alone, because in a franchise we do have to pay a certain amount of money as fee, but over time we realised that the market in Singapore is very tough with most players being well-established. So how do we compete with them? We chose something that was not known in this part of the world, but established elsewhere. I did not want another Indian restaurant serving almost the same food. So, while travelling to India I started searching for something that was unique. There are amazing cuisine concepts there. I heard a lot of good things about Tea Villa from different people, through various mediums, and so explored it further. After several visits to its cafes located across the city, I was drawn not just by the menu or the food, but the décor and vibe as well. Singapore didn't have this kind of food. Also, this is a huge coffee market compared to tea. While there are a few that are high-end and formal, we don't see many tea cafes or shops that are casual.

Tea Villa Café has a huge tea menu with over 100 varieties, but what makes a visit here worthwhile is a diverse vegetarian menu covering Western, European, Mexican, Italian, Lebanese and Indian and even in Indian cuisine there is an interesting twist.

**India Se:** Why did you opt for a 100 per cent vegetarian café?





**Abhishek Rathod:** I am a non-vegetarian while my wife is a pure vegetarian. I realised when we went out, the options for vegetarians in most non-Indian restaurants was quite limited. I felt bad because I had so many options, but she had only a couple of choices. I felt why shouldn't vegetarians get a wide choice? They should be able to eat pizzas, pastas, pancakes, waffles... whatever they wish. That's where the idea came. Today our restaurant offers 8-9 varieties of pizzas alone. Food and drinks are very affordable and there is something for everyone.

**India Se:** It has been four months since you opened. How has it been so far?

**Ekta:** We opened without much fanfare or noise. Even our friends didn't know. But we did manage to get a full house both for lunch and dinner. So far, we have been doing good business during the weekends, but we still need to pull in the crowds during weekdays. Given our location on East Coast Road,

we are not near any office complex, but we do get groups of office-goers coming in for team lunches and women for kitty parties.

We ran special promotions for National Day, Independence Day and our 3-month anniversary, which were all very successful.

**India Se:** Tell us about the food that is served at Tea Villa Café? What are your best-selling items?

**Abhishek Rathod:** Our Pav Bhaji fondue is very different and unique. Typically, when one table orders it, others get curious and follow suit. Besides this, we have Mac'n'cheese pizza, Paneer tikka pizza, Paneer bhurji quesadilla, and Indian Maggi. We also serve eggless pancakes, waffles and cakes. We also have cheese and chocolate fondues

So far, the feedback on the food has been very good and people are amazed by the presentation.

We also ensure that the food is fresh and all the ingredients are completely vegetarian including our cheese. Neither our staff nor our guests are allowed to bring in food containing meat or eggs.

**India Se:** Does the franchise model allow you to make changes

to your menu?

**Abhishek Rathod:** Usually a franchise model doesn't let you change things, but because the owners are young, they are flexible and open-minded. The franchise doesn't have alcohol, but in Singapore we offer beer and wine. This is to not lose customers to other nearby outlets.

**India Se:** Singapore is a very tough market for the F&B industry, hence the quality of food

and service suffers. How do you overcome that?  
**Abhishek Rathod:** We have six full-time staff and some part-timers. But our main chef is from India, provided by the master franchise. I am also very hands-on and so you will find me working across all departments including serving the guests. Despite manpower restrictions, our aim is to provide quality food to our customers. We do not pre-cook and freeze our food or import frozen food, but try to keep it as fresh as we can. During our early days, customers had to wait for long to get their orders, but now we have streamlined our operations. When customers often ask us 'how does your food taste so fresh?' I say, that our food is like home-cooked fare - simple and fresh.

**India Se:** Tea Villa Café also has a very hip décor and presentation.

**Abhishek Rathod:** All the cutlery and crockery are custom-made. It gives us great joy when people click photos and share them. Here in Singapore, even our kettles and pots are in demand. Our fries are sold on mini-bicycles. Apart from good food, I believe that the presentation must also be good.

**India Se:** Why did you not choose to launch in the central business district?

**Ekta:** Before we decided on this location in the East, we did think about Raffles Place. But the latter is a 'five-day business' place and gets very quiet during the evenings and weekends.



TULSI HOLY CHAI  
 REFRESHMENT HERBS  
 BERRY BUNCH  
 LYCHEE TEA  
 OM TEA  
 MASALA TEA



*“People are interested in taking Tea Villa Café to Malaysia and Indonesia because they realise that the concept is unique and good.”*

**Abhishek Rathod:** But the East is a preferred residential area where there is a large Indian community as well as expat group with good spending power. We thought this was ideal because as a first outlet we wanted a bigger space. It is also cheaper to rent space here compared to the CBD which would have cost us three times more for a smaller-sized unit. We are trying to establish ourselves here for we have the right audience.

**Ekta:** Since it is a residential area, we felt people with families would come regularly. So the moment the shop house was available, we took it.

**India Se:** Do you have expansion plans?

**Abhishek Rathod:** Yes, we do have plans to grow the brand. We are aiming to have three outlets by 2020, including one in the CBD. People are interested in taking Tea Villa Café to Malaysia and Indonesia because they realise that the concept is unique and good. We can franchise it to others there. We also have investors approaching us to work on partnerships and franchise, so we will see what works best for the brand.

**India Se:** Tell us a little about your background, upbringing.

**Abhishek Rathod:** I grew up in Bombay, and come from a typical middle-class family. My mother was a housewife, who did part-time catering and my father used to work at an MNC, but after retirement is a part-time housing agent. My parents worked hard to give us an education and I secured a degree in commerce and accounting from MVLU Chinai College, Bombay. I managed to do well in studies, but always dreamt of doing something big. I think I am the dreamer and risk-taker in the family, while my older brother is more the stable type. I was always interested in business, but it so happened that I interviewed for a job at JP Morgan Bombay and got it. After three years I moved to Singapore through Barclays and then Bank of America.

So, given my background, for me no job is a small one. I am a hands-on person and hence today I am involved in every aspect of the business – be it sourcing, marketing, administration, HR and even waiting tables. I want to establish and take this brand to another level.

**Ekta:** I am a third generation Singaporean, my dad was a business man and mother was a home-maker who used to bake from home. We met at Barclays in 2009 and today we are family raising our daughter, Suhani.

**Abhishek Rathod:** I think I am the luckier one as she has given me the freedom to pursue my dreams. ■