

This roadside eatery gets 7,000 foodies every day

US President George W. Bush's remark of the Indian middle class consuming more than ever before certainly seems to hold true at a busy highway eatery on the outskirts of Jalandhar city that attracts over 300 people an hour - or 7,000 every day!

Clients savour everything Indian, from makki di roti and sarson-da-saag to dal tadka to sleep-inducing lassi at Haveli, a private enterprise offering five-star comforts that has changed the way people look at roadside dhaba culture.

What's more, in a state where butter chicken and tandoori chicken find undisputed favour, the eatery has succeeded by serving only vegetarian food cooked in desi ghee.

It took Haveli owner Satish Jain, 39, just a bit of enterprise and a calculated risk in 2002 to tickle the Punjabi palate and create a brand name even as thousands of dhabas line up the highways and roads.

Haveli, which means a big, traditional bungalow, is not about 24x7 food alone. Located on one of the busiest roads in Punjab - the Ludhiana-Jalandhar-Amritsar national highway (NH) 1 - it is an example of the rich and even flamboyant Punjabi tradition and culture.

Right from the actual Tata truck parked inside the air-conditioned expanse of the restaurant here to traditional household items, agricultural tools and other simple things found in villages - the decor of Haveli takes people on a virtual tour through the heart of Punjab.

As if that is not enough, another section of the sprawling 23-acre complex, Rangla Punjab, is an even better depiction of the state's rich culture and tradition.

This section is a mini-village in itself with small shops offering drinking water to 'jyotshi' (astrologer) services, a wooden wheel, a chaupal, a stage for an evening show and even a bio-scope to attract visitors.

All buildings in the Haveli complex are built from the traditional 'nanakshahi' bricks (small tiled bricks which are linked to the first Sikh guru, Nanak Dev), which were accumulated by Jain and his team from villages across Punjab. Some of the bricks used here are said to be nearly 100 years old.

It is not only the traditional ambience of the place but the distinct cleanliness and discipline that make it an attraction for motorists along the highway.

'We take proper care of every need of our customers. From the kitchen to the eating areas and even the toilets - everything is nothing less than a five-star facility. At the same time, we want people to get a feel of Punjab's rich heritage and good food. Our focus is on the quality of food and cleanliness,' Haveli group's general manager Khalid Siddiqi told IANS here.

The restaurant is a mix and match of regular chairs and the more comfortable 'manjas' (rope cots) with round pillows. There are 'pidis' (small stools) as well. The walls and corners of the restaurant are adorned with traditional kites and colourful 'dors', 'pankhis' (hand-held fans), swords, shields, phulkari wall hangings and 'chulhas' (earthen stoves).

Food is served in traditional plates called 'thalis' while lassi comes in big brass glasses.

'We have been sending our staff to villages across Punjab to select and purchase traditional things from there,' said Siddiqi.

Buoyed by the success of this enterprise, the Haveli group is setting up two similar ventures along NH-1 at Karnal in Haryana and Rajpura in Punjab.

Besides the main Haveli restaurant and Rangla Punjab, the complex offers a fort-theme based banquet that can accommodate nearly 3,000 people in its covered and open areas.

A Kapurthala town based non-resident Indian (NRI) groom flew into the banquet two years ago in a helicopter to take home his bride after their wedding here.

The nearly 500 staff members include traditional 'maharaj' cooks and waiters dressed in typical Punjabi lungi, kurta and half-jackets. They appear Punjabi but are drawn from all over India and even Nepal. The staff comes from Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and even Karnataka.

'I and four others came here five years ago from Karnataka. We love this place,' a butler said.

It is not only the variety of vegetarian food available here that attracts people, especially the NRIs, but also the low price of the items.

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